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Rattling Dick.



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RATTLING DICK,

THE MOUNTAIN OUTLAW.

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RATTLING DICK, THE MOUNTAIN OUTLAW.

CHAPTER I.

TRIAL AND SENTENCE.

THERE was an unusual excitement in Diamond Gulch, one April morning.

As the mist rose from the valley, and crept up the somber sides of the mountains, the rays of the sun slanted over the crest of pines that crowned the eastern cliffs, and sent shafts of light down among the cabins and hovels and tents and shelters of Diamond Gulch. It also brought into view a number of rough, heavily-bearded men, with eyes ablaze with excitement, and faces dark with determination, who were collected in groups, with their weapons in their hands or conspicuously displayed upon their persons, earnestly talking in a rude language, that was copiously interlarded with strange oaths and uncouth expressions.

An outrage had shocked the "moral sentiment" of the camp.

Shasta Dick, an old Californian, who made a business of following up the new discoveries, and who had lately been more than usually successful in his mining operations, crawled out of his cabin, after the stupid sleep that had succeeded a heavy debauch, with a tale of robbery on his blue lips.

He had lost not less than a hundred ounces of dust.

When Shasta Dick had revived his shattered senses by pouring down his seasoned throat a big draught of fiery whisky, he told his story, and did not hesitate to charge the theft upon the man who had been his sleeping partner for the night.

The gold was contained in a canvas bag, which Shasta Dick declared that he had placed under the blanket that formed his pillow, when he laid down to sleep. The man who slept in the hut with him had seen him put it there, and who but he could have taken it?

This was merely a strong ground for suspicion; but there was other evidence in the case, sufficient to induce the dwellers in Diamond Gulch to resolve to lay violent hands upon the person who was accused by Shasta Dick.

That person was a man over fifty years of age, who was known as Ben Durk. In appearance he was altogether unlovely, and by no means calculated to produce a favorable impression. He was tall, gaunt and bony, with bronzed and wrinkled face, and with a heavy and grizzled beard. Small gray eyes, sunk deeply in his head, looked from under masses of bushy eyebrows. He had the air of a man whose life had been a continuous warfare with the elements and with his fellow-men, and who had been worsted in most of his encounters.

No one knew where he came from—in fact, no one cared—and it was but a few weeks since he had made his appearance at Diamond Gulch. As a miner, he had met with very poor success, but he had already acquired considerable reputation as a hunter. It was supposed, from the style of his conversation and his habits, that he had hunted and trapped in the wilds of the Far West during many years; but he had volunteered very little information concerning himself, and no one had cared to inquire into his history.

He had been a companion of Shasta Dick in his debauch, and had accepted the invitation of that worthy to “take a snooze in his shanty.” The gentleman from Shasta thought it very hard that his bottle-mate and room-mate should have “gone back on him” to the extent of stealing his dust, and was of the opinion that the culprit ought to be punished for the breach of the laws of good-fellowship, as well as for the crime of grand larceny.

While Shasta Dick was telling the story of his loss, Ben Durk was sleeping a broken, troubled slumber, from which he had not awakened when his fellow-citizens of the Gulch came to capture him.

He had the reputation, although he had done nothing to deserve it, of being a dangerous man, and the men who went to take him had thought it necessary not only to go well armed, but to use all proper precautions to prevent him from doing them bodily injury. In fact, they wished to treat him as the Philistines treated Samson—to surprise him in his sleep—and for this purpose they carefully surrounded the hut, before making any demonstrations toward the interior.

Pushing open the door of the shanty, they looked in, and saw Durk wrapped in a blanket, lying on a rawhide bed, with his arms flung out and his mouth open, pumping forth his breath in huge snores.

Softly as they filed in, only three had entered when he awoke and started up. The three threw themselves upon him.

Durk struggled and swore, and nearly succeeded in ridding himself of his assailants; but they were reinforced, and he was overpowered and securely bound.

He was taken out of the shanty and down to Bart Traber's grocery, where the sovereign citizens of Diamond Gulch proceeded to organize themselves into a court, composed of jury, witnesses and audience. This done, the prisoner was informed of the charge that had been preferred against him.

Old Traps, as Durk was commonly called by the miners, shook his head, pried open his eyelids, and mildly petitioned that he might be allowed some whisky.

Such a request could not reasonably be refused, and the prisoner, having lubricated his machinery, proceeded to inform the audience that the charge was "all a durned lie."

This remark being considered by Shasta Dick as a personal reference to him, there was a prospect of a lively little fight; but the belligerents were restrained, and Shasta Dick was convinced that it was beneath his dignity to fight a man who was accused of stealing. It was decided that the statement of Old Traps should be treated as a plea of not guilty, and that the evidence should be heard.

Shasta Dick told his story, the substance of which has already been stated, and it was cheerfully corroborated by the accused.

"That's even so, gen'lemen," said Durk. "I saw him take

a bag out of his black carpet-sachel, and put it under his blanket jest afore he laid down. That's all I know about it, and I s'pose it's all he knows about it, too. I reckon he's honest in his thinkin' I took it, and I know I am honest in sayin' I didn't."

The next witness was Calvin Peaslee, better known as "the doctor," a man who appeared to be about the same age as the prisoner, but much better preserved. He was dressed in a suit of rusty black, surmounted by a battered silk hat. His demeanor, as well as his attire, showed that he considered himself entitled to some consideration in that community; but he had not as yet succeeded in obtaining any exalted position.

He commenced his statement in this style:

"My tenement adjoins that which is occupied by the gentleman who is known as Shasta Dick. I occupy that tenement—referring to my own—in conjunction with my assistant, John Smith, who, being a half-breed Shoshonie, is useful to me in procuring the valuable roots and herbs with which this wild region abounds, and which enter into the composition of various medicaments which I prepare for the cure of—"

"Easy on that, doctor," suggested Aleck Withers, or "the Judge," who had once been an alcalde somewhere, and whose title, as a matter of course, had stuck to him.

The doctor bowed benignantlly, and continued his narration.

"I was proceeding to state that I was awake until a late hour last night, being engaged in the preparation of some pills of my own invention, which have a magical effect in the cure of fever-and-ague, remittent fever, bilious complaints, rheumatism, nooralgy, and all diseases that are prevalent in—"

"Cut it short, doctor, if it's all the same to you," interrupted the judge. "We hain't got time to bother with talk."

With a few more admonitions, Peaslee succeeded in finishing his statement.

He had been busy, until a late hour of the night, with his assistant, compounding medicines. At about midnight, happening to look in the direction of Shasta Dick's shanty, he

had seen a person issuing from that tenement, whom he recognized as Ben Durk. The prisoner was walking unsteadily, as if somewhat intoxicated. In his right hand he carried a canvas bag, in his left a pick-ax. Peaslee called the attention of his assistant to the movements of Durk, who went into the timber at the foot of the hill, and was absent some fifteen or twenty minutes. When he returned to Shasta Dick's cabin, the pick was still in his hand, but the canvas bag was not in sight.

John Smith, the half-breed, was then offered as a witness and a discussion ensued as to whether there was enough white blood in his veins to allow him to testify. His evidence was finally admitted, and corroborated that of Calvin Peaslee.

A pick that had been found in Shasta Dick's shanty was then produced, and it was evident that it had lately been used.

The case against the prisoner was closed, and he was asked whether he had any thing to say in his defense.

Old Traps rubbed his eyes, and shook his head, mournfully.

He said that he couldn't understand it. It must be that he was guilty; but he wouldn't have belived it if it hadn't been proved against him. He supposed that the witnesses had spoken the truth; but he had no remembrance of leaving the shanty, and knew nothing about the canvas bag or the pick. If it was true that he had stolen Shasta Dick's dust and buried it, he felt impelled to say they sold mighty mean whisky at Beaver. He would gladly repay the amount, but everybody knew that he had had no luck since he came to the Gulch, and at that moment he was tetotally cleaned out.

It was suggested that he had better go dig up the bag he had buried, and restore it to its owner; but he declared that he knew nothing about it, and had not the least idea where he should go to look for it.

This statement was considered as mere contumacy, and the jury retired to make up their verdict.

In a few moments they returned, and reported the conclusion at which they had arrived. They found Ben Durk guilty as charged, and sentenced him to receive twenty-nine

lashes on the bare back, and to be banished from the Gulch.

Old Traps was terribly indignant at this ignominious sentence. He strove to break his bonds and escape, but was unable to cope with the many who were arrayed against him. He raved, cursed and threatened; but the violence of his language was as ineffectual as the violence of his actions.

The sentence was duly executed, and Old Traps left the valley, without casting a look behind him.

CHAPTER II.

FALSELY ACCUSED.

ALECK WITHERS watched the convicted culprit until he was out of sight, and then turned away, shaking his head with the air of a man who was not satisfied.

"Any thing the matter, Judge?" asked Calvin Peaslee.

"We ought to have hung that man or let him go entirely. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he should go for some of us before long."

Peaslee winced, and his tallowy complexion looked yellower.

"That man Durk was a dangerous individual," he said. "His punishment ought to have been more severe; but that can't be helped now. Our community is well rid of him, and I am in doubt whether we ought not to banish his partner."

"His partner? Didn't know he had one."

"Henry Ashby is the only man who has been thick with him, here at the Gulch."

"Nonsense! There's nothing wrong about young Ashby. He has taken pity on the old man, because of his bad luck, and has wanted to help him—nothing more."

"I think he needs watching, anyhow."

"Have you any grudge against Henry Ashby?" asked Withers, rather sternly.

"I? Of course not. I am only speaking for the good of the community."

"Um! I wouldn't be surprised if the community is able to look out for itself. I don't want to hear any thing more about it. I am sick of the business, as it is."

"Reckon the Judge is scared up," muttered the doctor, as Withers turned away; "but I don't see any thing to get frightened about."

The young man of whom Peaslee spoke was absent from the Gulch at the time of Ben Durk's trial, having gone to Beaver on business. Just before night he returned, and was highly indignant when he heard what had happened. But Peaslee had not neglected to throw out insinuations concerning "Old Traps' partner," and Ashby perceived that his indignation only increased the suspicion with which he was evidently regarded. One miner went so far as to hint that a man who could sympathize with a thief was no better than a thief himself. As Ashby had partisans in the camp, it is probable that there would have been a general fight, if the supply of whisky at Traber's grocery had not run short.

When the young man retired to rest, his anger had not abated. He was mortified at the suspicions that were afloat concerning himself, and felt no small degree of pity for Ben Durk, who had been, as he believed, so harshly and unjustly treated. Before he fell asleep, his last thought was that he would "settle the matter" in some way, pretty soon.

The next morning, however, a different face was put on affairs.

Shasta Dick crawled out of his cabin, looking very sheepish, and said that his conscience compelled him to make a confession.

He had dreamed, during the night, that his bag of dust was in his black carpet-sack. When he awakened from the dream, he was so forcibly impressed by it, that he hunted up the carpet-sack, opened it, and found the bag of dust lying there, safe, untouched, not a scale missing. Then he dimly remembered having risen from his sleep, the night before, with a vague suspicion of Old Traps in his mind, and having resolved to change the hiding-place of his treasure. He could not doubt that he had carried out his intention, while he was half

asleep and three-fourths drunk, and that the occurrence had been obliterated from his memory, until it was partially revived by his dream.

This statement was accepted as truth. It was certain that the dust was in his shanty, and the conclusion was unavoidable that Ben Durk had not stolen it. The next question was, had Calvin Peaslee and the young half-breed told a lie?

As it was the general opinion of the miners that they ought to be "brought to law," they were cross-examined very closely concerning the statement they had made; but both adhered to it strictly, and no amount of persuading or threatening could induce either of them to vary in any particular from the evidence they had given on the trial.

Their statement, also, was generally accepted as truth, although there were some chronic unbelievers who discredited it. There were others who inclined to the suspicion that Old Traps had returned under cover of the night, had dug up the bag of dust that he had buried, and had replaced it in Shasta Dick's shanty.

The general belief was that he had gone out at night, and had buried something, and the question arose, what had he buried? If his own statement was to be credited, he had no remembrance of the occurrence, and the matter was probably of no importance, as he was not believed to have been possessed of any thing worth hiding.

Henry Ashby was dissatisfied with the whole affair. He knew that Ben Durk had been wrongfully accused and punished, and believed that the old man's wrong ought to be righted in some way. He declared his intention of going to seek Old Traps, for the purpose of telling him how he had been vindicated, and of persuading him to return to the Gulch. There were some who advised him against this course, from motives of policy. So long as Old Traps believed himself guilty, he might harbor no very vengeful feelings toward those who had punished him. If, however, he should discover that he had suffered as an innocent man, it was to be expected that he would cherish a grudge against the Gulch, and that he might feel inclined to "take it out" of his accusers or judges. But no one insinuated that the principles of truth

or honor should prevent Ashby from informing the old man of the facts of the case, and he believed that he was fully justified in what he proposed to do.

He had a pretty good idea of the locality in which the banished man was to be sought, and set out on his errand before noon, riding his own horse, and leading another, which he intended for Ben Durk.

It was not until late in the afternoon of the next day that he came in sight of the place where he expected to find Old Traps.

He had been ascending, with considerable difficulty, a spur of the "Rockies," and had reached an elevation where he was obliged to dismount, as it was impossible to proceed any further on horseback.

As he was tethering the horses, he heard a shot above him.

Looking upward, he saw a mountain sheep at the edge of the cliff. After a vain attempt to cling to the rock, it fell, and dropped upon the ground, dead, a short distance from where he stood.

"A good shot," muttered Ashby, when he had examined the animal, and perceived that it had been struck just behind the foreleg. "Whoever fired that shot knew where and how to put in his bullet."

Ashby supposed that the person who had fired would come down to claim his mountain mutton, and knew that he could gain nothing by advancing or retreating, whether the hunter should prove to be a friend or an enemy. After examining his rifle and revolver, he took position near the horses, and waited and watched.

He soon heard a rattling of stones, and saw a man descending the mountain at no great distance.

At the same time he was seen by the stranger, and each reconnoitered the other carefully.

Apparently both were satisfied; for the hunter continued his descent, and Ashby came out from the favorable position in which he had placed himself.

"Glad to find you, Ben Durk," said the latter, advancing and holding out his hand to the hunter, when he reached the plateau.

"What are you doin' here, boy?" asked the old man, a

strange moisture filling his eyes as he grasped the hand of his young friend. "Whar did you come from?"

"Diamond Gulch."

"What brought you here?"

"I came to see you."

"Did you know that I was a thief, that I had been whipped and driv' out o' the Gulch for stealin'?"

"I know that, and more. I can't tell you how sorry I am for what has happened."

"Sorry is no name for it, with me. Should think you'd be ashamed to take my hand. It was a bad business on my part; but those fellers marked me."

"Not for life, I hope, old friend."

"The marks will fade off of thar," replied Durk, touching his back; "but they've gone in, and I'm marked for life in that way, I reckon."

"Let us try to look at it in some other light. I have brought you some news. Shasta Dick has found his gold-dust."

"*What!* Jest wait thar a minute, Harry, till I 'tend to this crittur."

The hunter cut the throat of the sheep he had killed, and hung it upon a point of rock. When he returned to his young friend, he was quite tranquil in appearance; but there was a puzzled look on his countenance.

"Say it ag'in, Harry—what you said a minute ago. It may be that I didn't rightly understand you."

"I said that Shasta Dick has found his gold-dust. He had hid it himself. He got up at night and put it away, and forgot that he had done so. Night before last he dreamed of it and found it, and yesterday morning he told us all about it."

"It seems to me, if that is really the state of the case, that I didn't steal it, after all."

"Of course you didn't steal it."

"Those folks lied, then, who said that they saw me go out and hide the bag."

"I believe not. They stand to that story. They say that you certainly did go out, with a pick in one hand and a canvas bag in the other, and that you returned without the bag. The pick showed that it had been used during the night."

"That's a fact. I wonder now whose dust it was that I stole. Anythin' else missin' about thar?"

"Nothing that I have heard of. Perhaps, old man, if you buried any thing, it was something that belonged to yourself."

"Didn't have nothin' to bury—nothin' of the sort. The fact is, Harry, that when I have been drinkin' beyond a sartin limit, my memory is clean gone. I h'isted in consid'able p'ison at Beaver—you heerd of that, prob'ly—and I don't remember a thing that happened arter I left thar, until they piled in on me the next mornin'. How I got hold of the bag of dust, and why I hid it, and whar I buried it, are three things that are jest as mixterious to me as they can be to anybody."

"Perhaps it is all a mistake, and you buried nothing. At all events, the matter is settled, as far as Diamond Gulch is concerned. The people are sorry for what has happened, and all you have to do is to go back with me, and hear them say so."

"Not much, Harry. No more of that for me."

"I hope you are not going to bear a grudge against those people?"

"Don't know whether that's the name for it, or not; but I've a notion that the sight of me won't be healthy for some of 'em. I've never been struck a lick since I was knee high, except in a fair fight; and now—but I don't want to talk about it. Come up to my den, boy. It's gittin' on toward night."

CHAPTER III.

THE HONEST MAIL-CARRIER.

THERE was no post-office at Diamond Gulch, as the camp was newly located, and the discoveries of gold had not been sufficient thus far to attract any considerable population. The nearest stage route was ten miles away, and Beaver, the nearest post-office, was a fair day's ride distant.

Two days before Shasta Dick announced the loss of his bag

of dust, Calvin Peaslee was at Beaver, his principal business there being to procure the mail matter that belonged to Diamond Gulch.

A man was detailed for this purpose every few days, by the inhabitants of the Gulch, and "the Doctor," who was not engaged in mining, and who frequently rode to Beaver, was generally delegated to bring out the mail for the Gulch.

It was not because Peaslee was considered more honest than the rest that he so often secured this appointment, but simply because of his frequent trips to the post-office, and because he had never been detected in any dishonesty. There were those among the miners who regarded with feelings akin to aversion his tallowy complexion, his pursed-up mouth, and his weak, uncertain eyes. They did not hesitate to declare their belief that he was a "rotted humbug," and that any Digger Indian knew more about doctoring than he knew.

Peaslee appeared to prosper in spite of these opinions. He never wanted for any thing; he always had money to loan, on good security and at a high rate of interest; he was quite successful as a physician, judging by the many journeys, on professional business, that he made in all directions. He was employed by those even who believed him to be a quack, and who declared that his pills and potions only served the purpose of keeping people sick, so that the doctor's bill might be lengthened. His fees were always as large as he dared to make them, and he had, on more than one occasion, administered on the estates of patients who had died under his hands. In fact, he was believed to be wealthy, and there was no "deep scrutiny" made into the means by which he had obtained his money.

Having procured the mail for Diamond Gulch, he packed it in his saddlebags, strapped them on the back of his mule, mounted, and set out to return.

He kept the stage route until he was about two miles from Beaver, when he turned aside into a deep and wooded glen, where he dismounted, hitched his mule, unstrapped the saddle-bags, and proceeded to examine their contents.

He scrutinized the letters carefully, poring over the directions, feeling of the packages, and striving to peep inside of the envelopes. Now and then he laid one aside.

A pile of half a dozen of these selections had accumulated, when he came to a letter that made him start, and a little color appeared in his tallowy cheeks.

The postmark was Richmond, and the letter was directed to Henry Ashby, with instructions to the postmaster at Beaver to forward it, if he should know the whereabouts of the person to whom it was addressed.

After a little hesitation, Peaslee cut open the envelope, took out the letter, and read as follows:

RICHMOND, VA., Feb. 4th, 18—.

“FRIEND HARRY:

“I am writing to you on speculation. It is so long since I have heard from you, that I have not been able to guess what has become of you. My knowledge has been limited to the bare supposition that you were somewhere in the mining regions, and hardly any thing could be more indefinite than that. It was only lately that I learned, by a strange sort of slant, that a person named Henry Ashby had been seen or heard of in the far-away locality to which I direct this letter. Deeming it possible that you may be the person, I write, as I have said, on speculation, hoping and praying that these lines may reach you.

“If you get this, and are alive when you read it—I knew I should have to make a bull—you will be informed that your uncle, Carroll Hundsdén, is dead. It is nearly a year since he died. I am one of the executors of his will, and you are the heir. He left his property, which is considerably larger than I had supposed, to you, as the only child of his favorite sister. That is to say, it will be yours if you turn up and claim it within two years from the date of his death. If you do not, the property goes to his younger brother, Levi Hundsdén. I have advertised for you all over creation and part of Canada, and had supposed that you must be dead until I heard of the Henry Ashby away out yonder.

“Levi Hundsdén is also missing, and is supposed to be somewhere at the West. He left here about eight months ago, and has not since been heard from, to my knowledge. But he knows the terms of the will, and will undoubtedly put in an appearance, if living, in time to claim the estate, if no prior claim turns up.

“I mustn't forget to say that your old flame, Clara Staunton, is westward bound, or will be before many weeks. It was not her fault that she was separated from you, but the work of her father, who was, as you know, nearly crazy on the subject of money. He made a bad failure and it killed him. It is my belief that Levi Hundsdén, who is one of the meanest rascals living, was the cause of Mr. Staunton's failure, and

must have swindled him outrageously; but I have no proof of this. I know that the yellow-faced old reprobate was 'froze' for Clara to marry his son, Black Dick Hundsdon, and that the poor girl was persecuted until she nearly consented. Clara and her brother, Turner Staunton, have scarcely any thing left in the way of property, and are about to emigrate to Oregon, where Turner hopes to make a living by practicing law, and Clara expects to teach school. Perhaps you may run across them, as I suppose everybody meets everybody out in that region, and a thousand miles or so is a matter of no consequence.

"I must close by hoping that this letter may find you, and that you may prove to be *my* Henry Ashby. If so, you will write to me immediately. If not, why, then—somebody may learn that I am as capable of making bulls as any Irishman. Seriously, I hope that this letter, if it should not reach Henry Ashby, may fall into the hands of some one who knows or has known him, and who will have the kindness to send such information as may be in his possession, concerning the said Henry Ashby, to me the undersigned, directing to Box 435, Richmond, Va.

"GEORGE B. MAY."

Peaslee's eyes glistened as he read the letter, and his tallow face was contorted into various shapes.

"No use to run any risks with the others now," he muttered. "A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. If I always have such good luck as this, I needn't complain. Business must be attended to now, without fail. When they get to shooting as close as this, another shot may hit the mark."

Laying the letter on the grass, he bundled the others back into his saddlebags, including those which he had picked out and laid aside, and strapped the saddlebags upon the mule.

As he buckled the strap, he heard a rifle-shot not far from where he was standing, and it startled him. He ran back, picked up the letter, and hastily thrust it into his pocket, then mounted the mule, and rode rapidly away in the direction of the stage-route.

About ten minutes after Peaslee had left the glen, a young man came down into it from the north. His dress was not that of a hunter, although he carried a rifle, but in quality and cut was such as might be seen in the cities of the east. If it had been he who fired the shot that startled Peaslee, he

had no game to show for it, and he wore a somewhat wearied and disappointed look, as of one who had been endeavoring to hunt, but had met with poor success.

He reloaded his rifle—a duty which should have been performed immediately after it was discharged—and then seated himself on the grass, choosing the very spot that had lately been occupied by Calvin Peaslee.

As he did so, he caught sight of the envelope of a letter that lay on the ground near where he was seated, and picked it up.

He started when he looked at the address on the envelope, and a slight exclamation escaped from his lips. Then he perused the writing more carefully, examined the postmark, and looked about the glen.

“Harry Ashby!” he said, in a tone that indicated his surprise. “It may be my old friend. The name is not such a common one, and he is supposed to be somewhere in the west. This handwriting seems familiar, too. I am greatly mistaken if it isn’t George May’s. And the postmark—yes, it is certainly Richmond. The letter is from May, addressed to Henry Ashby, and Ashby must be somewhere in this vicinity. It is strange that May said nothing about it to us; but perhaps he hadn’t learned Ashby’s whereabouts before we left Richmond.”

The young man got up and walked about the glen, noticing the hoofmarks where Peaslee’s mule had stood, and the tracks that he had made in coming to the place and leaving it.

“It’s not long since some one was here,” he said, “and it must have been the owner of the letter, Henry Ashby himself. If I were as skillful as some of these western hunters, whom I have read about, I suppose I should have been able to tell how long ago he had come here, and the exact moment when he left. It may be that I have missed seeing him only by a few minutes. But it is of no consequence that I should see him, and Clara might not wish it. I have had such miserable luck with my hunting, that I believe I will get back to the town, or station, or whatever they call it.”

The young man was afoot, and it took him nearly an hour

to get to Beaver. When he reached the "rattle-trap" that was called a hotel, he was hailed by the landlord, a hatchet-faced Yankee.

"Hello, Mr. Staunton! where's your game?"

"I left it behind me. Haven't seen any thing worth speaking of."

"It seems that you eastern chaps never do have any luck."

"I have brought back a splendid appetite, and that is a good thing for me, if not for you. I want to ask you, Mr. Cattell, while I think of it, whether you know a man in these parts named Henry Ashby."

"There is a young man of that name, or was, up at Diamond Gulch; but I don't know much about him."

"Has he been in town to-day?"

"Not that I know of. There was one man from the Gulch here to-day, named Calvin Peaslee."

"How far is it to Diamond Gulch?"

"Some thirty or forty mile, I calkilate. Thinkin' of goin' up thar?"

"I believe not. My sister is in the house, I suppose?"

"Reckon you will find her in her room."

The young man passed through a rough, unpainted hall, ascended a rickety staircase, and knocked at the door of a room, which was opened by a young woman.

CHAPTER IV.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

THE young woman who opened the door to Turner Staunton's knock might have been a year or so over twenty, and was a true type of dark-haired, dark-eyed southern beauty, with cheeks like the bloom of the peach, rich red lips, and large, eloquent eyes, each of which was, in itself, a world of beauty.

"Already returned?" she asked, as she admitted him. "What luck have you had with your shooting?"

"None at all," he replied, as he entered and took a seat on a rude chair.

"Indeed! Here you are in the hunter's paradise, and can find nothing to shoot, when I expected that you would at least bring home a grizzly or two. I shall be forced to believe that you are not such a mighty hunter as you have claimed to be."

"I must confess that I haven't been attending to the business of hunting very closely, but have been walking about and thinking of other matters. My thoughts have been in the future and on the other side of the mountains. But I have brought you some news, Clara."

"You have brought it to a good market. I am nearly dead to hear some news."

"This news is about Henry Ashby."

Clara started. Her face turned pale, and then flushed deeply.

"You startled me," she said, when she had recovered her composure. "What news have you about Henry Ashby? Is he alive?"

"I believe so, and that he is not far from here."

He handed her the envelope that he had picked up.

"I found that while I was hunting. It had lately been dropped by somebody, and that somebody, I suppose, must have been the person to whom it was addressed. I recognized the handwriting of George May in the direction, and concluded that this Henry Ashby must be our old friend of Richmond. I have asked the landlord here, and he tells me that there is a young man named Henry Ashby at Diamond Gulch, some thirty or forty miles from here; but he don't know much about him."

"I am very glad to learn that Henry Ashby is alive, and that May has found him out. There will be no danger, now, that Levi Hundsdén will get possession of that property. This letter must have been written since we left Richmond, though I can't make out the date of the postmark."

"It is just possible, Clara, that this may not be our Henry Ashby, that May has heard of a man of that name, and has

written to learn who he is. I would like to see **this** man."

"He might not be anxious to see us. Harry was quite poor when father drove him from our house, and forced me to break my engagement with him. He was as proud as he was poor, and was very angry at having been treated so badly, and no one can blame him. Now the tables are turned completely. We are as poor as he was then, and his uncle's will has made him a rich man. Besides, he has not written us a line since he went away, and we have only heard of him casually. I hope, Turner, that you were not thinking of hunting him up."

"I had no such intention. I would not be able to spare the time, in fact, as I must meet Mr. Kane in Portland before the end of the month. It is our turn to be poor and proud now, and we will not be likely to force ourselves upon Ashby since he has grown rich. Still, I would like to see him."

"And I must confess that I would be glad to see him, too," responded Clara, with a sigh.

"If this is our Henry Ashby, May's letter has probably informed him of his good fortune, and he will hasten to Virginia to take possession of his property. We will not be likely to meet him again in this world."

"As God wills. What can't be cured must be endured. When is the stage expected, Turner?"

"Not until to-morrow, I believe. I will go and make some more inquiries."

When her brother had left the room, Clara Staunton leaned her head upon her hand, in an attitude of dejection, and her eyes filled with tears. The memory of a lost love was painful to her.

Turner was met, when he had ascended the stairs, by the landlord, who again accosted him.

"You was axin' me, stranger, about a chap named Henry Ashby, of Diamond Gulch. There's a man from the Gulch in town now, and I reckon he can tell you what you want to know about Ashby. I saw him go into the saloon over yonder, a few minutes ago."

"If you will be kind enough to point him out to me, I will go and speak to him."

"I don't mind steppin' over and givin' you an introduce."

Turner Staunton and Cattell crossed the street, and entered the "saloon" that the landlord had spoken of—a reeking rumhole, of moderate dimensions and immoderate nastiness. There were several rough customers at the bar, among whom was an oldish-looking man, who appeared to be "on his high horse," and afflicted with a desire to "spend his money free," greatly to the delight of the bummers of Beaver.

Cattell touched this man on the shoulder, and called his attention to Staunton, whom he thus introduced:

"I say, Ben Durk, here's a stranger from the States, who wants to git acquainted with you. His name's Staunton, and he wants to ax you about Henry Ashby, if there's such a man at the Gulch."

Staunton returned the miner's hearty shake of the hand, and invited him and the bystanders to "partake," and the invitation was unanimously accepted. Having performed this duty, and appeased the appetites of the bummers for a while, he inquired of Durk whether there was a man named Henry Ashby at Diamond Gulch.

Durk replied, in answer to various interrogatories, that there was such a man; that he knew him well and "thought the world" of him; that he was a young man, with dark hair and eyes; that Durk didn't know where he came from originally, or how long he had been in that region; that Diamond Gulch was a new diggings, and nobody had been there long; that he had "taken a great notion" to Ashby, and believed that Ashby had "sorter" liked him.

"Would you take a message to him from me?" asked Staunton.

"Sartin. Take a drink, stranger."

This necessary ceremony being gone through with, Ben Durk took Staunton aside, laid a hand on his shoulder, and spoke to him impressively:

"It's right that I should tell you, stranger, that I'm on a tear. I came down to Beaver for a tear, and a tear I'm bound to have. When I git on a tear, and fling myself outside of a sartin or onsartin amount of whisky, my memory goes whirlin', and I clean forgit every thin' that's said and done. So, if you want to send any word to Harry Ashby, you had best

write it down. If you can fix it up somehow, so's I won't be apt to lose it, all the better."

"Very well. If you will wait here awhile, I will soon get my message ready and bring it to you."

Staunton hastened over to Cattell's establishment, and up to Clara's room.

He told his sister that he had met a man from Diamond Gulch, by whom he intended to send a message to Henry Ashby.

"There can be no harm in this," he said, in answer to her objection, which was implied by her manner, rather than expressed in words. "I shall only drop him a note, stating that we have passed through this country on our way to Oregon, and congratulating him on his good-fortune. I had better send him a paper containing the advertisement for him, as it is possible that May has merely written to ascertain whether he is the Henry Ashby who is wanted. You need not fear that I will compromise you in any way, sis."

"Very well," said Clara, and her brother wrote the note, took a newspaper from his trunk, and left the room. On the stair he found a small canvas bag, which had probably been used for holding gold-dust, and had been thrown aside. He picked it up, and stuffed the note and the newspaper into it. After a slight hesitation, he took from his pocket a small photograph of his sister, and placed it within the bag, which he carefully tied.

Then he hastened to the saloon over the way, where he found Ben Durk, to whom he delivered the canvas bag.

"That's the ticket," said the old man, as he thrust the package into an inner pocket of his rough coat. "I will be sure to open that bag at the Gulch, and Harry Ashby will git what is in it, and then I will wonder whar it come from. Take a drink, stranger."

Staunton, deeming it necessary to fall in with the customs of the country, insisted that it was his treat, and was permitted to make his escape after he had paid for the "p'ison."

After making some inquiries concerning stages and routes, he returned to Clara's room, and informed her that the stage for Freeze-out would probably pass during the evening of the next day.

"Freeze-out!" exclaimed Clara. "What a remarkable name."

"It does sound rather queer to a stranger," replied Turner. "It was probably given to the place by the first settlers, who found it a very cold locality, or were fond of the game of freeze-out poker. I only know that the stage stops at Freeze-out, and that there we can get a conveyance to take us a hundred miles or so further on."

CHAPTER V.

THE STAGE ADVENTURE.

THE stage from Beaver to Freeze-out was within a few hours of its destination. During the second night of its journey between those important points, there had been no stoppage, except for an occasional rest at difficult places. The passengers had been forced to take such sleep as they could get within the vehicle, and the driver and horses had been obliged to do double work. The driver, in answer to the complaints of the passengers, accounted for this tedious nightly travel in a manner that was satisfactory to himself.

"King's station is played out," he said, "and we have to skip one station. That is rayther rough; but it can't be helped, as Rattlin' Dick made a bustification of the place nigh about a week ago."

"Who is Rattlin' Dick, and why did he make that bustification?" asked one of the passengers.

"Rattlin' Dick is a chap who stops the stages, now and then, and picks up little things. He made King and his folks an offer, to let 'em go in cahoot with him; but King wouldn't do it. Once he got wind of a haul that Rattlin' Dick was goin' to make, and gave information that sp'ilt the job. So Dick got mad and lit down onto the station, one night, and cleaned it out. I don't know what became of King; but the shanty was burned, with the stables, and the folks war driv' off."

"Rattlin' Dick, then, is a robber," remarked the passenger.

"Well, I have heern some people speak of him in that way, when he wasn't about; but I believe that he calls himself a road-agent."

"Does he act alone, or has he a band?"

"Thar's some six or eight of 'em—sometimes more, sometimes less."

"Where are his head-quarters? I suppose he has a den."

"Up in the hills somewhar. You can't expect *me* to know."

"Is there any danger that we will be attacked by him?" asked a lady passenger.

"Reckon not. He never stops the stages goin' this way, unless thar should happen to be somebody aboard that he wanted to see quite partic'lar."

As it was useless to borrow trouble concerning Dick the Rattler, the passengers slept as they could and grumbled as they pleased, until morning, when the driver assured them that a few more hours' riding would bring them to Freeze-out.

They had just left a piece of bad road, where the trail led through a rather difficult pass, and were emerging upon a plain that ran up into the hills like a bay, when the stage came to a sudden halt, as the driver reined in his horses, in obedience to a gruff voice ahead.

The two male passengers looked out, and saw three mounted men near the horses' heads. Two of these carried rifles, which they pointed toward the stage, and in the right hand of the third was a leveled pistol. At each side of the stage was another armed man, visible through the bushes that covered the low hills, and in the rear two or more others, on foot, were coming out of the pass. There was nothing peculiar in the appearance of these men, except that the faces of all were nearly covered with black masks.

"Quit p'intin' them shootin-irons this way!" shouted the driver to the men in front of him. "They might go off and hurt somebody. What do you fellers want, anyhow?"

"Do you know who we are?" asked he with the pistol, whose gruff command had caused the stoppage of the stage.

"Of course not. How should I? Wouldn't know my best friend, with his face kivered up like that."

"It is well for you that you don't know us. I am Dick the Rattler."

"That's all right, I reckon; but thar ain't nothin' here for you. This stage is goin' up to Freeze-out."

"You have two passengers there whom I want."

"You don't say so! Who are they now?"

"A young man and a young woman—Turner Staunton and Clara Staunton."

"Anybody inside who answers to those names?" asked the driver.

Turner and his sister looked at each other. The latter was deathly pale, and her brother's face was red with anger. They also looked at the other passenger, the man who had talked with the driver concerning Rattling Dick. He sat bolt-upright, with no change visible in his countenance, and had no arms in sight. Turner Staunton's rifle was at his side, and he had a revolver in his waistband; but of what avail would these be against such odds?

"Do you know what this means?" he asked in a low tone, addressing the other male passenger. "What can we do? Have we any chance to defend ourselves?"

"There is nothing at all to be done, as far as I can see," replied the other. "If we were out where we could have a fair sight, and the driver would help us, we might show fight; but we are shut up here in the stage, and I believe that the driver is in league with the robbers."

"The parties are here," said the driver, in response to the impatient questioning of Rattling Dick.

"Tell them to step out, then, and let the young man bring his weapons, if he has any. I will not interfere with the others."

"Do you hear, inside there? The boss road-agent says that you two Stauntons must step out, and the young man must take his weepens, if he has got any."

"I hardly know which is the robber," muttered Turner—"the man on the horse, or he on the box."

He looked at Clara as Rattling Dick's order was repeated to him, and laid his hand upon the butt of his pistol.

"Don't attempt to resist," she said. "You would only lose your life. We must submit quietly to our fate, whatever it may be. Good God! what sort of a country is this that we have come into?"

"Hurry up there!" shouted Rattling Dick, "or it will be worse for you."

Turner Staunton stepped out of the stage, and assisted Clara to alight. She stood beside him, pale and trembling, while the driver threw their baggage down upon the ground.

The remaining passenger kept his seat, concealed from the view of those outside.

"That's all," said the driver, as he resumed his place and took up the reins.

Rattling Dick waved his hand, the whip cracked and the stage started on, rolling rapidly over the plain, and leaving two of its passengers, with their baggage, at the mouth of the pass.

Dick the Rattler, with his two companions, rode up to where Turner Staunton and his sister were standing, and was there joined by the two men who had kept at the roadside, and by those who came out of the pass. Turner was relieved of his rifle and pistol, and two horses, one of which was provided with a side-saddle, were brought forward for him and Clara.

The stage was bowling along, in the meantime, at a good rate of speed, and no words passed between the driver and the one passenger who remained inside, until it arrived at Freeze-out, before nine o'clock in the morning.

The town of Freeze-out, judging by its appearance, might appropriately have been named Played-out, and played out it probably would have been, but for its position as terminus of the stage route. In this capacity it could boast of an express-office, a post-office and a hotel. The rest of its shanties seemed to be all occupied as liquor shops. There was a blacksmith's shop, it is true, and there may have been two or three groceries or general stores; but a man would have been likely to win who should have bet that liquor was sold at all of them.

The driver of the stage, having given his team in charge to the stable men, went off to "have a round with the boys"

before eating his breakfast. The one passenger, being left to his own devices, stepped out with his luggage, which consisted of a leather valise and a flat mahogany case.

It could then be seen that he was a man of medium size, or rather below the medium, apparently about thirty years of age, with light hair, keen gray eyes, and an intelligent countenance. His dress was of a dark tweed, neatly cut and made, but suited for rough weather and rough work.

He entered the hotel, saw that his baggage was taken care of, washed his hands and face, and ate the breakfast that was set before him with a good appetite. Then he lighted a cigar, which he took from a case of his own, and strolled out into the street.

The stage-driver was there, relating the story of the morning's adventure to a group of miners and Freeze-out loafers. He was enthusiastic in praise of his own coolness and courage, and, as the passenger issued from the hotel, called upon him to certify to the truth of what he was saying.

"This gentleman was thar," he said. "He is the passenger who stayed in the stage. He can tell you that I talked right up to Rattlin' Dick. Didn't I, stranger?"

"You talked right into his hand," coolly replied the passenger.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean that it was very convenient for him that you were there to answer his questions. He wasn't obliged to run into danger by going to see who were inside, while you were ready to tell him all he wanted to know."

"How could I help tellin' him, with them rifles and pistols p'inted at me? Did *you* show fight, stranger?"

"No. It would have been useless, as there were only two of us. If there had been three we might have tried a tussle."

"You couldn't expect *me* to take a hand, fixed as I was."

"Perhaps not; but I expect you to quit boasting about the courage you didn't show on that occasion."

"You seem to have a heap to say about this business, for a stranger."

"I believe that I was interested in it to a certain extent, and you called upon me to speak. I must say that it is a

burning shame and a black disgrace, to any community that pretends to be civilized, that such a red-handed rascal as Rattling Dick should commit outrages of that kind, almost in sight of town, and should still go unpunished."

A heavy, rough, black-bearded man appeared to take umbrage at this remark, and stepped up in front of the passenger.

"Look a-here, stranger," he said; "this community don't allow itself to be talked about in that style, and Rattlin' Dick ain't no sech a man as you say he is."

"If this community or Rattling Dick's friends can prove that what I have said is not true, they are welcome to do so."

"You've got to eat those words, now, right sudden."

"I have finished my breakfast, and don't intend to eat any thing more until dinner-time."

"Go for him, Tom!" "Trail him out!" "Put a head on him!" were some of the hints thrown out by the bystanders, who evidently sympathized with Rattling Dick and his advocate, and were pleased at the prospect of a row.

The black-bearded man stepped forward threateningly, half-drawing a pistol from his belt.

So suddenly that no one knew how or whence he had drawn it, a shining revolver appeared in the right hand of the passenger, cocked, and with its deadly tube leveled at the left eye of his antagonist.

"Smith & Wesson, patent cartridge, conical ball, waterproof caps—that's my hand, old man," he said. "If you can beat it, pile in. If you can't, the sooner you put away that pistol and pass out, the better for you."

"You hold the keards, stranger," said the black-bearded man, as he shoved his pistol back into the belt, and then he quietly slunk away from the crowd.

"I don't want to insult anybody," said the passenger; "but you all know that what I have said is the truth, and you ought to act upon it."

He quietly walked away, and entered the post-office, where he inquired for letters for James Maddox. He was given a letter, on a corner of which was printed: "Post-Office Department—Official Business."

"Can I see you in private?" he asked the postmaster.

"Certainly. Walk in, sir."

The postmaster showed him into a small apartment, and handed him a seat.

"There was a mail robbery in this vicinity not long ago," he said.

"More than one," was the reply.

"I refer to one that was committed February 14th. That was a valuable mail, and its loss was noticed."

"I remember it."

"My name is James Maddox. I am a United States marshal, also a special agent of the Department. I am here for the purpose of investigating that affair among other matters."

"Not much use in bothering about it now, I should say. The mail is gone, and it can't be helped."

"That robbery is supposed to have been committed by the road-agent who is known as Rattling Dick, or Dick the Rattler."

"There can't be any doubt that he got the mail."

"I have a warrant for his arrest."

"Not worth while to try to serve such a warrant in this section."

"This warrant can be served in any portion of the United States."

"I don't doubt that you have a *right* to serve it, but you had better not try to use the right. You would need a regiment to take Rattling Dick, and then the chances are ten to one that you wouldn't find him."

"Nevertheless, I mean to arrest him."

"You do! Pretty tall talk that, Mr. Maddox. What do you suppose you could do, alone?"

"Can't I get you to help me?"

"Not much. I had rather live a little longer."

"I suppose you are aware that I have a right to call upon you, and that the loss of your office would be one of the penalties of your refusal."

"I wouldn't give the skin of a starved coyote for the office, on those terms. It is worth a little to me; but my life is worth a great deal more."

"Very well. I won't ask you to run into any sort of

danger ; but will expect you to give me all the information you can give, without compromising yourself. I shall arrest that man, dead or alive, and I am inclined to think that his death would be worth more than his capture."

"It's a big job, Cap. You had better back out before you get in too far."

"My duty is plain, and I mean to do it," said Maddox, as he rose to go. "Of course you will keep this business a secret. I shall mention it to no one else, and it is important that it should not leak out until I am ready to act."

"I will be mum as a mouse. Call in whenever you feel like it, Mr. Maddox. I will be glad to see you."

"That chap is all grit or all blow, and I believe it's the grit," muttered the postmaster, when he had shown out his visitor.

Maddox went to his room in the shanty that served the purpose of a hotel, to which his baggage had been taken. There he unlocked his mahogany case, disclosing a fine breech-loading rifle, with cartridges and all the requisite equipments. He took it out, put it together, and inserted a cartridge. Then he examined the caps and chambers of his revolvers.

With the rifle in his hand, he sauntered out of the hotel, chose a trail that led toward the hills at the west, and soon left the town of Freeze-out behind him.

CHAPTER VI.

FROM THE MOUNTAIN TOP.

OLD Traps threw his mountain sheep over his shoulder and led the way, followed by Henry Ashby with the two horses. Passing around a point of the plateau, they entered a narrow gap in the mountain, through which they passed with difficulty, and came into a little green valley, set like an emerald in the depths of the overshadowing hills, and with a diamond of a spring glittering in what might be called its head.

"Is this your den?" Ashby asked.

"No. It is higher up. You may leave the horses here. They won't stray from this place. Put the saddles under shelter somewhere, and bring the blankets, and come with me."

Ashby did as he was told to do, and followed the old man up the rough side of the clifflike hill. They had some hard climbing, and the young man wondered how the old one could make his way so well, incumbered as he was with his load of game; but they reached the end of their journey at last, and found themselves on a narrow, level, rocky space, near the summit of a tall peak.

It was now nearly dark, and little was to be seen, except the cliff that still towered above their heads, and the indistinct outlines of the crags and hills that were wildly jumbled together far below them.

Ben Durk led the way into a hole in the rock, to enter which they were obliged to stoop. Once in, the place appeared to be almost large and close enough to be called a cavern, and to form a very good shelter from the elements. Old Traps stirred up the embers of a fire, and soon had a pleasant blaze, which made the interior quite cheerful. He then skinned and cleaned his mutton, portions of which were soon broiling on the coals, giving forth a most appetizing odor.

A hearty meal was followed by a sedative smoke, and then after a little conversation, the two friends wrapped themselves in their blankets, and slept soundly until morning.

Henry Ashby was out at daybreak, and amused himself, while breakfast was being prepared, in viewing the immense panorama spread out around him, which was beautiful, grand, sublime, magnificent—beyond the reach of words.

At first all was mist, and he did not dare to move, lest a step might send him to certain and swift destruction. Then the mist-wreaths began to float away, revealing the snowy summits of opalescent peaks far in the distance. Then the clouds settled, seemingly in solid strata, below him, and the rough ranges of the "Rockies" came into view—mountain piled on mountain, peak on peak, and crag on crag, in the wildest and grandest confusion, with shreds of clouds scat-

tered here and there, as if to hide the ugliest places or conceal the most dreadful abysses. Through rents in the white veil of mist below him could be caught, now and then, pleasant glimpses of far-off green prairies, traversed by shining streams.

He was called from this feast of beauty to a less romantic but more substantial feast of mountain mutton.

When this was ended, Ashby and Old Traps lighted their pipes, and sallied out to enjoy their smoke and the scenery.

The sun had risen, lighting the mountain tops, and clothing them in varied and brilliant colors. The mist that clung around the sides of the peak were gradually dispersing, giving a view of the diversified landscape toward the east, where the eye might wander over unnumbered leagues toward the sunrise, until it reached the limit of its ability to travel.

Far below and beyond them, out from the foot-hills and over the broken plain, ran a dark thread through the surrounding green, which the experienced eye recognized as a road.

Along the thread crawled something that seemed no bigger than a fly, and Ashby, pointing it out, asked what it was.

"That must be the stage for Freeze-out," replied Durk. "I suppose it gets along sooner than it used to, since King's station has been cleaned out. Hello! what's the row? Something's the matter down thar, I do believe."

The flylike object had stopped, and other diminutive objects, that had not been previously perceived, were visible near it. Ashby drew from an inside pocket of his coat a small telescope, and hastily adjusted it to his eyes.

"You are right," he said. "It is the stage, and it has been stopped. I see three men on horseback, and I believe there are more; but they don't seem to be doing any thing."

"Let me take a look, Harry."

The lenses of the telescope were arranged, with a little difficulty, to suit the old man's eyes, and he looked through the glass long and earnestly.

"Rattlin' Dick, I'll bet a hoss!" was his conclusion. "That's the way he does business, and I make no doubt that he is bossin' that job. You can see the rifles, Harry."

Ashby took the glass, and soon uttered an exclamation of surprise and anger.

"A man and woman have got out," he said. "They are standing by the stage, and baggage is being thrown off. Now the stage has gone on, leaving them there, and the mounted men ride up to them. There are others on foot, and I count seven or eight. I believe it is a case of kidnapping."

"Looks like it."

"What are we going to do about it?"

"We?"

"I said we; but you needn't take a hand unless you want to. For my part, I am convinced that some devilry has been done, and I mean to look into it."

"What can we do, Harry?"

"Find out what is the matter, in the first place. Then we will know what we ought to do, and when we know that we can make up our minds as to what we can do."

"I am with you, my boy; but, if the difficulty is Rattlin' Dick's doin', we two can't count a trick, and had better keep out of the game. As the first move must be to find out what the matter is, we ought to go on to Freeze-out, and hear what the driver of the stage has to say about it. It is best to be sure we are right, afore we go ahead."

"Very well. It won't be much out of our way to visit the place where the stage was stopped. We can soon see whether there is any thing to be learned there, and then go on to Freeze-out."

They descended the mountain to the valley in which the horses had been left, and found the animals pleasantly employed in cropping the sweet, green herbage. Saddling them, they picked their way out through the gap to the plateau, where they mounted, and rode down to the foot of the range.

The descent of the mountain had occupied considerable time, and they were obliged to take a circuitous route to get to the mouth of the pass where the stage had been stopped; so that it was nearly noon when they reached that point.

No satisfactory discoveries were made there. They could see where the stage had stopped, where the mounted men had been stationed, where the baggage had been thrown off and where the robbers—if they were robbers—had left the

road with their prisoners, making a broad trail that led up into the hills; but all this told them nothing. For any evidence to the contrary, the man and woman whom they had seen might have left the stage voluntarily, on meeting a party of their friends, though this supposition was not at all reasonable.

By careful observation they counted the tracks of seven horses, together with the marks of several men on foot. Among the tracks was the shape of a lady's delicate shoe, and that of a gentleman's fine boot, such as were not often seen in that section. When Henry Ashby noticed the former, he touched it with his fingers, and actually blushed as Old Traps caught him in the act.

"What's the matter?" asked the old man. "Did any thing bite you?"

"I must confess," replied Ashby, "that the sight of that track did send a sort of thrill through me. I couldn't help thinking how I should feel if any lady acquaintance of mine—a sister or any dear friend—had been captured and carried away by such a set as Rattling Dick and his crew."

"'Twould be apt to rile a man. But thar's trouble enough in the world, without thinkin' of what might be. Those two tracks don't go any further, Harry, and it follers that the man and the woman have had hosses to ride."

"What shall we do about it? Shall we follow the trail?"

"It seems to me that we ought to go on to Freeze-out, to larn who the people war, and what happened to the stage."

"I suppose we ought; but I had much rather follow the trail."

"And git into trouble. Boys will be boys, and are bound to have boyish ways. Suppose we split the difference, Harry, and stop here until we eat a bite, and think the matter over."

This was agreed to, as both were hungry, and they had brought cold meat from the mountain.

"Shall we trail now?" asked Ashby, when they had satisfied their appetites.

"Better take a smoke, I reckon. I never thought thar was much to be gained by hurryin', unless you see a man about to

draw a bead onto you. Perhaps the smoke will put the right notion into our heads."

They filled and lighted their pipes, and smoked in silence until that resource was exhausted.

"I've come to the conclusion," said Old Traps, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe, "that we ought to go to Freeze-out."

"And I," replied Ashby, "am quite positive that we had better follow the trail, and see where it leads to."

"Hold on, my boy. Thar's a man comin' this way. Should take him to be a stranger in these parts, from his looks. Perhaps he is from Freeze-out, and may know somethin' about that stage-stoppin' business. Anyhow, we may as well wait till he gits here, and ask him about it."

The stranger appeared to be somewhat suspicious of the two men when he discovered them. He halted, hesitated a moment, and then resumed his walk toward them.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNEXPECTED ALLIANCE.

THE man who came from the direction of Freeze-out was light-haired, neatly dressed, and carried a short rifle under his arm. He was, in fact, the person who had introduced himself to the Freeze-out postmaster as James Maddox.

When he reached the place where Durk and Ashby were standing, he accosted them in a pleasant and off-hand manner.

"You seem to be taking things easy here, gentlemen."

"Rayther so," replied Old Traps. "Did you come from Freeze-out, sir?"

"Yes."

"War you thar when the stage got in this mornin'?"

"Yes. It is hardly three hours since I left Freeze-out."

"You must have done some tall travelin', for a man afoot."

"I am a fast walker, and I took a short-cut through the hills. The road winds around them, you know."

"That's a fact. Perhaps you can tell us what happened to the stage this mornin' 'arly. We saw it stopped here, and allowed that it might have got into some trouble."

"You saw it? Where were you?"

"On a mountain, over yonder."

"Which mountain?"

Durk pointed out the peak, near the summit of which he and Ashby had passed the night.

"That is a long distance from here," said Maddox. "You surely can't have seen much."

"My friend had a spy-glass, and we looked through that."

"What did you see that caused you to take such an interest in the matter?"

"We saw the stage stopped by some mounted men, and saw a man and a woman git out. Some plunder was flung off, the stage went on and left 'em, and the mounted men rode up to 'em."

"Was that a very strange proceeding?"

"It seemed so strange to us, that we thought there must be some deviltry goin' on."

"If you knew, then, that a wrong had been done, you would be willing to try to right it?"

Ashby nudged his companion, who evidently understood the hint.

"Are you a lawyer, stranger?" he asked.

"Not exactly. Why do you ask that question?"

"Because I started in to find out something from you, and have been doin' nothin' but answer your questions."

"I believe I have got ahead of you a little, in that respect. But now, as I have learned what I wished to know, I will give you the information you desire. I can tell you what happened to the stage, as I was a passenger in it."

"You war? Then thar warn't no robbin' or kidnappin', arter all."

"Why do you think so?"

"Because I see you here, safe and sound."

"That doesn't justify your conclusion. The man and woman whom you saw were taken from the stage against their will, with their baggage and carried away. The party that

stopped the stage was led by a road-agent who is known as Rattling Dick."

"Any other passengers, besides you?"

"None; and I am inclined to believe that the driver was in league with the robbers. I am certain that he would not have attempted to resist them. The young gentleman would have been willing to show fight; but his sister protested, and I cautioned him against it. We could only have lost our lives without accomplishing any good."

"Your head is level. Tell us all about it, please."

Maddox proceeded to do so, after giving his name, but without stating his business. When he mentioned the names that Rattling Dick had called for, Henry Ashby started up with a cry of pain, as if a shot had struck him.

"What names were those?" he asked.

"Turner Staunton and Clara Staunton."

"Know 'em, Harry?" anxiously asked Old Traps.

"I believe I do. I have no doubt of it. They are old friends of mine. In fact, I may as well confess that Miss Stanton was once very dear to me. May I ask you a question, Mr. Maddox?"

"As many as you please. I don't know whether you feel free to trust me; but I flatter myself that I am something of a judge of men, and I have been taking the measure of you two, and believe that I can trust you."

"I want to ask you why you came back to this place from Freeze-out, to-day."

"For the same reason that brought you here—because I believed that a wrong had been done, and I wanted to look into the matter."

"Why did you come alone?"

"Because I knew of no one whom I could trust to come with me."

"Is it for no other reason, beyond what you have told us, that you wish to look into this matter?"

"I would like to lay my hands on the man who is called Rattling Dick. I would be glad to get him into my clutches so securely that it would be impossible for him to get away."

"We seem to understand each other. As each of us has a

special interest in this matter, why should we not join our forces and investigate it?"

"If you had not made the proposition, I would have made it. I suppose we can hardly expect your friend to aid us, as his interest is not the same as ours."

"Count me in," remarked Old Traps. "That Rattlin' Dick is a tough subject to handle; but I will wade in as deep as either of you. You see that I was right, Harry. I told you that we ought to go on to Freeze-out."

"I think that I was right, when I said that we must follow the trail. You see that this is what we have to do."

"We war both right when we concluded to wait awhile. Now we know what we ought to do, and are ready to take up the trail."

"I judge from your appearance," said Maddox, "that you know how to follow a trail, and we will rely upon you for that part of the business. Do you know any thing of the haunts of this Rattling Dick, or of the number of his band?"

"Thar's seven or eight of 'em, as I've heerd. They keep up in the hills somewhar, and that's about as much as any honest man knows of thar hidin'-places. The first thing for us to do is to foller the trail until we tree the varmints. I can't purtend to guess what we shall do then."

"That is enough for the present. When we see what is to be done, we will probably know how to do it. We had better be getting on, as we have no time to waste."

Ben Durk led the way, followed by Ashby and Maddox, with the horses, and the plain trail was traced without any difficulty, as it wound among the foothills, until it led up into the mountains. Then it was not so easy to follow, and at last they reached a point, at a considerable elevation, where it was judged best that they should not take the horses any further, as Old Traps was of the opinion that they could not be far from the den of Rattling Dick and his followers.

A secluded place was found, into which the two horses were led and secured, and the men went back to the trail.

It was near sunset, and they were beginning to believe that night would overtake them before they could reach the objective point of their journey, when they came to a crag that rose before them, dark, lofty, and apparently impassable.

They had been traveling, during the past hour, through a succession of ravines, ridges, and rugged mountain tracts, which must have been extremely difficult for the horses that had preceded them to traverse, and now came this crag which seemed to put an end to further progress in that direction.

Ben Durk cautioned his companions to advance slowly and carefully, as it was possible that they might be quite close to Rattling Dick's head quarters.

After proceeding a little further, the old man moved a short distance to the right of the trail, motioning to the others to halt.

He had come in sight of a gap in the crag, a narrow opening, as if the rock had been rent by some mighty convulsion, leaving a mere slit, through which it would not have been possible for two horsemen to pass abreast. This gap was nearly hidden by a jutting point of the cliff, and this was only visible upon a close approach. Even then, nothing could be ascertained, except that there was an opening in the rock, the interior of the gap being black with its darkness.

Traps had beckoned to his friends with the purpose of communicating his discovery to them, when all were startled by a loud and shrill whistle, that seemed to come from the heart of the crag. It was immediately answered from a distance, the answer being so faint as hardly to be heard by the three seekers.

The echoes of the whistle had not died away when the old man suddenly dropped upon the rocky ground.

At that moment a rifle cracked, and a bullet whizzed through the space where his body had been, showing that his movement had been executed none too soon.

He picked himself up, and hastened back to where his friends were standing.

"We had better git away from here," he said. "That shot was fired at me, and the chap who fired it wasn't shootin' cotton."

"Must we run?" asked Ashby.

"No. We can walk, if we want to; but we had better git a little further away from here. We have treed 'em, and I know the hole they have run into; but it's too dark to do anythin' now, and all the odds are ag'inst us. I will tell you more after a bit. We mus'n't stay here to be shot at."

Under the direction of Durk, the party took the back track, and finally concealed themselves in a ravine, at a short distance from the trail they had been following. There they seated themselves, to rest and to listen to Ben Durk's explanation of the cause that had led to his retreat.

He described the gap that he had perceived in the rock, and said that he had thought he saw a gun-barrel glisten in there, and had dodged to avoid the shot that he expected.

"Do you think it is a cave that they are in?" inquired Maddox.

"No. The fact is, boys, I know jest what it is. I told you that we had treed 'em, and that I knew the hole they had run into. I have been thar afore; but I didn't know the place until I had run right onto it. That gap goes through the rock, and opens onto one of the purtiest spots that mortal eyes ever rested on—green and bright and handsome, with big trees growin' in it, and with a brook runnin' through it that's as clear as diamonds. But thar's no comin' at it. All creation couldn't git through that gap, if thar was anybody in thar who wanted to keep 'em out. That thing is jest completely, entirely, altogether out of the question."

"We must get in there somehow," remarked Maddox.

"If they can keep us out, we may keep them in," suggested Ashby. "It might be possible to starve them into a surrender."

"Thar would be the innocent ones to starve, too," replied the old man. "The plan wouldn't work, anyhow, as they can hold out thar at least six months. I believe I have got a sort of a notion of somethin' that might be done; but it ain't worth while to open on it jest now. We had better git back to whar we left the hosses, and stay till mornin'."

There was, in truth, nothing else to be done, and the party retraced their steps, with considerable difficulty, to the place where the horses had been concealed. There they made a frugal meal of the cold meat they had brought with them, and prepared to pass the night.

CHAPTER VIII.

WANTED—A PARSON.

THE usual crowd of miners and loafers was collected in the one street of Freeze-out, and especially in front of the hotel, where the most popular bar-room was located, when a man whom nobody seemed to know rode into that metropolis, coming in by the track that formed the stage route between Beaver and Freeze-out.

There was nothing very noticeable about this individual, except that he would have been considered, by most people, a very fine-looking man, though some would have failed to be favorably impressed by his countenance, which was dark beyond the limit of swarthinness, and by his small and twinkling black eyes, and his lips that were nearly as thick as those of the negro. He was a well-formed animal, rather fantastically dressed, and evidently gloried in his masses of raven-black hair, that fell down luxuriantly upon his broad shoulders. He rode a handsome and powerful black horse, and he and his steed were objects that would naturally excite attention anywhere.

It was no wonder that the eyes of the Freeze-outers dwelt upon him admiringly, and that they gave respectful answers to the questions he addressed to them.

"Is there a parson in this town?" he asked, without dismounting, and directing his question to one of a group near which he had halted.

"Parson?" replied the individual whom he had honored by this inquiry. "Not much. I reckon you are the first customer, stranger, who has called for that article since the town was started. We hain't got on our spring stock in that line o' goods."

"Beaver is ahead of you, then. They had a journeyman soul-saver there awhile ago; but he got badly used-up in a sort of an argument he had with some of the boys, and quit the diggings."

"Sorry we can't accommodate you, stranger. Any thing in the marrying line out your way?"

"Something of the kind, I believe."

"We would be glad to get a slice of it here; but it is all a one-sided business with us. I believe you didn't happen to mention where you were from."

"I believe I didn't."

Evidently he did not intend to. Just then another member of the group spoke up.

"I've heerd that thar's a parson out at Lost Diggin's, stranger. It may be the same man who was run out of Beaver."

"I don't care who he is, if he is a parson. Are you sure he is there?"

"I heerd he was thar last week, and I don't suppose the chap lied who told me."

"I believe I will strike out for him. 'Mornin', gentlemen."

"Should think he might have stood treat," said he who had been first addressed, as the dark man on the black horse rode rapidly away.

"Reckon he might, if he had wanted to; but I wouldn't have liked to give him the hint," remarked another. Wonder, now, if that ain't Rattlin' Dick."

"Rattling Dick! Of course not. What would bring him to Freeze out? I have seen Rattling Dick, though I didn't get a sight of his face. He is built like this man, I admit; but he didn't seem to have any hair at all; while this one has acres of it."

The group soon dropped the subject of the dark man, and awaited another sensation, or pricked up their ears to hear the welcome sound of an invitation to drink.

Lost Diggings was a small and rather unpopular settlement, if it could be called a settlement. Gold had been discovered there, once upon a time, in such paying quantities that there was a great rush to the locality, and every available inch had been staked out in claims; but the diggings did not "pan out" according to promise, and soon appeared to be entirely exhausted. Then there was a general stampede from the place, and it was nearly deserted. Other discoveries, of no

great extent, were subsequently made which attracted a small population, and such was Lost Diggings when the dark man on the black horse rode in and asked for a parson.

"Thar was a parson here," answered the man of whom he inquired. "In fact, he hangs out here yet; but he has gone away somewhar. Got any job in his line of busiress?"

"Something that way, I believe. When will he be back?"

"In a day or two."

"I will leave a message for him with you. Tell him to be at the mouth of Wild Rose Pass, next Thursday at noon."

"Are you used to givin' orders in that style, stranger?"

"Yes."

"But perhaps the parson ain't used to obeying 'em. Shall I tell him who wants him?"

"You may say to him that Rattling Dick has need of him."

"The livin' Satan! What if he won't go?"

"I have given him plenty of time to make the connection. If he comes he will be well paid for his trouble. If he does not he will visit the New Jerusalem considerably sooner than he expected to. If my message should not be delivered, I shall know whom to hold responsible for it. You understand me well enough."

The dark man wheeled his black horse and rode away, apparently satisfied that the orders he had left at Lost Diggings would be promptly and fully obeyed.

"Reckon I *do* understand you," muttered the miner to whom he had spoken. "It goes mighty ag'inst the grain with me to be ordered about in that fashion; but I don't mean to burn my fingers, so long as I can keep 'em out of the fire. I will tell the parson and he will be the one to settle for it if he don't go. That high steppin' chap must have been Rattlin' Dick himself. It was him or one of his men, sartin as sunrise."

He gave the details of the interview to the miners, who compared notes, arriving at the conclusion that the dark man on the black horse could have been no other than Rattling Dick himself.

The excitement at Lost Diggings soon extended to Freeze-out; and one of the "Lost" people recounted the occurrence

in front of the hotel at that metropolis, where James Maddox happened to be smoking a cigar and keeping his eyes and ears open.

This man declared that the people of Lost Diggings were satisfied that the person who had left an order for a parson to be sent to the mouth of Wild Rose Pass was Rattling Dick himself, and that they were "half scared to death" through fear of the reprisals that the desperado might make upon their community, if the "man of Bibles," as he termed him, should not be forthcoming.

When he had finished his narrative, he was interviewed by Maddox, who, after the necessary preliminary lubrication at the bar, took the man up to his room, and had a private conversation with him, the result of which he shortly afterward communicated to Ben Durk and Henry Ashby, in the same apartment.

"If you are as well satisfied as I am, that that fellow was Rattling Dick," he said, "for what purpose do you suppose he wants the services of a minister? I am afraid, Ashby, that his purpose must have reference to the young lady whom he captured and took to his den."

Henry Ashby grew red in the face with indignation as he admitted the probability of this inference.

"This may seem to you to have a bad look," continued Maddox, "but it brightens the prospect for me. It presents the very opening that I was anxiously looking for."

Both his hearers opened their eyes pretty widely.

"Just the opening. You told us, old friend, that a regiment could not get through that gap; but you will see that one man can do it. That minister will naturally wish to shirk the unpleasant task of going into Rattling Dick's den, and I will take it off his hands. I think he will easily be induced to give me permission to go in his place."

"Is that your idea?" exclaimed Ashby. "Why should you risk your life? It is I who should take the minister's place."

"I don't think, if you will excuse me for saying so, that you are altogether so fit a man for the business as I am. Besides, you are too well known in these parts, and Rattling Dick or some of his men might recognize you. This idea is

my own invention, Ashby, and I won't allow any man to infringe upon my patent."

"What will you do when you get in there?"

"Nothing that will harm the young lady, you may be sure. I may do something that will astonish Rattling Dick."

Old Traps shook his head solemnly.

"What *can* you do?" he asked. "One man ag'inst seven or eight such chaps as those wouldn't count a p'int in the game. They would be sure to smell out the trick, and then you know what you might expect."

"I don't suppose, my friend, that I differ much from other people; but I must say that I am one man that gives himself little trouble about what is to come, as it is as much as I can do to attend to the present. The first necessity for me is to get into Rattling Dick's den. Once in there, I hope that Providence or some inspiration will show me what to do and help me to do it. Just now I must leave you, and go to hunt my parson and make a bargain with him. Of course you will both see the propriety of keeping this business a secret."

When he had gone, Old Traps and Ashby discussed the chances of his success in his hazardous enterprise, but saw nothing encouraging in the prospect.

"That young lady he was speakin' of," remarked the old man—"what did he say war the names of her and her brother?"

"Staunton."

"Friends of yours, I believe."

"Yes; old Virginia friends."

"From the same part of Virginny that you came from?"

"Yes; from Richmond."

"Any father?"

"No; their father is dead, I have heard."

"What was his name?"

"John B. Staunton."

"Rich man?"

"He was once rich, but was bankrupt when he died, and left them with little or nothing."

"Bad luck for them, and worse luck now. That notion of mine, that is rollin' about in my head, has been growin', and I reckon I will have to take it out and set it to work."

"I would be glad to know what it is."

"You shall know some time, if I ever git it out. It's a big thing to manage, and I haven't rightly got the hang of it yet."

When Maddox returned to Freeze-out, he informed his friends that he had found the person of whom he had been in search, and had completed an arrangement by which he was to answer the summons of Rattling Dick in his place. The minister was to leave the Lost Diggings as if for the purpose of keeping the appointment, and would then go into concealment, remaining hid until he should be informed whether Maddox had succeeded in his mission or made a failure.

CHAPTER IX.

REVELATIONS.

DIAMOND GULCH was not without its exciting occurrences. Shasta Dick went down to Aleck Withers' shanty one night, and, after closing the door carefully, and depositing a black bottle on the table, intimated that he had come for the purpose of having a private confab.

He then proceeded to make a revelation that caused the Judge's eyes to glisten.

The Judge, excited by what he had heard, then disclosed to his companion, in entire confidence, the details of certain circumstances which had recently come to his knowledge, which caused Shasta Dick to stare in his turn, and extorted sundry strange oaths from his not unwilling lips.

The immediate result of this interview was the resolution of Aleck Withers that he would go and seek Henry Ashby and Old Traps, who had been heard of in the vicinity of Freeze-out.

When he mounted his horse in the morning, as his purpose had been made public, he was surrounded by the miners, who generally expressed the hope that he would find Old Traps and "make it all right with him." He was instructed to as-

sure the old man of the sorrow of the Diamond Gulchers for "that little mistake," and to persuade him to return to the Gulch, so that they might make amends for the wrong they had done him.

"Honor bright, now, Judge," said Shasta Dick, as he shook hands with Aleck in farewell. "Tell him just how it happened, and say to him that he can have his choice of claims."

The Judge promised that he would do his best, and struck his spurs into the sides of his raw-boned racer.

When he had reached Freeze out, and put up his horse, Henry Ashby was one of the first men he met, and his first inquiry was for Ben Durk.

"Do you want to see him?" Ashby replied.

"That is what I am here for."

"I don't know but you had better abandon the idea, or wait a while. He feels rather sore over that Diamond Gulch business, and there's no guessing what he might take it into his head to do."

"I must see him, anyhow. If I have done him any wrong, it hasn't been done intentionally."

Ben Durk himself happened to pass at that moment, and heard the last words that were spoken by Withers. He stopped, and looked sternly at the Judge, who held out his hand.

Duke drew back, and refused to touch it.

"I hope you won't refuse to speak to me," said the Judge, "as I have come here for the purpose of seeing you, and have some important news for you. If there is any thing I can say in the way of an apology for the part I took in that performance down yonder, I am ready to say it. If you want to take me out in the timber and give me a lashing, I'm your man, and you can just pile in, if that will settle the matter. We are all liable to make mistakes, in this world, old man, and all we can do, when we find them out, is to own up and say that we are sorry."

Ben Durk, after a little hesitation, took the hand that was offered him.

"I hain't felt as spiteful toward you, Judge, as I have felt toward some of the others," he said. "I know you to be a

squar' man, and one who does exactly what's right, according to his lights, and I'm willin' to pass over that business, if you won't say another word about it."

"I can't quite do that, and keep my word. I promised those men at the Gulch that I would tell you how sorry they are for what has happened, and try to persuade you to forgive them. Most of them say that you are welcome to take your grudge out of the hide of any one of them, if that will suit you; though they would rather have the dose distributed among them."

The old man could not help smiling at this novel mode of making amends.

"Most of them, hey?" he answered. "Thar's a few, I reckon, who would kinder want to sidle out of such an arrangement. But I don't want to say any thin' more about it, Judge, and we must drop the subject, if you and I are to be friends."

"Very well. Let's go and take a drink."

"Nary drink for me. I don't want to touch the stuff that made me steal."

"But you stole nothing."

"I buried somethin', and must have stole it."

"That is one matter that I want to explain to you. The bag which you buried has been found. Do you know any place where we can talk in private?"

Ashby suggested the room of James Maddox, to which he had access during the absence of its owner, and the three men went thither. When he had satisfied himself that they could not be overheard, the Judge commenced his revelation as follows:

"You know, friend Traps, that the pick which was brought forward at your trial was not closely examined. It was noticed that it had recently been used, and that was sufficient for the purpose, then and there. When Shasta Dick had taken it to his shanty, it remained there a day or so, and he then looked at it more carefully. As he was clearing off the mud, he saw a big scale of gold that had been caught by a break in the metal, and it made his eyes open, you bet! He knew that the pick hadn't been used in a long time, until that night, and he naturally concluded that it had then been

struck, by accident or otherwise, into the richest kind of a pocket. Of course he set to work right away to find the place where you had been digging. It wasn't an easy job by any means; but, after a long look and a number of false alarms, he found your tracks at a spot where the earth seemed to have lately been moved. He waded in with the pick, and soon dug up a canvas bag, which I have brought with me, and will show to you directly.

"While he was digging, he saw that the dirt was shining with such scales as the one he had taken from the pick, and he knew what must be below. So he dug down to a bed of clay, and there the stuff lay in chunks.

"Shasta Dick was satisfied. He picked out a couple of specimens and put them in his pocket. Then he filled in the holes and covered the place with leaves and grass. Then he staked out a claim, with that spot right in the middle of it, and staked out another by the side of it. The second claim is for himself, and the first he reserves for Old Traps here, who was, as Dick says, the real discoverer of the pocket.

"Dick came to my cabin that night, and told me all about it, and begged me to go and hunt Old Traps, and let him know of his good luck. Dick would have gone himself, but he was afraid that Traps might hold a grudge against him, and he didn't want to have a difficulty with a man whom he had wronged, although he had not intended to do any wrong. So he asked me to beg the old man to come back to the Gulch and pitch into his claim, as there is a fortune there for him, sure."

"I want to see that canvas bag," said Ben Durk.

Withers handed it to him, and the old man grasped it eagerly.

"I know what it means now," he said. "It all comes back to me. What a consarned fool whisky can make of a man! If I ever touch the stuff ag'in, I hope I may be scalped by a Digger! This bag belongs to you, Harry. It was given to me by a man at Beaver, and his name was Staunton."

He explained how he came into possession of the bag, and handed it to Henry Ashby, who opened it and took out a photograph, which he could not refrain from kissing. Then

came a note, which he read hastily, his countenance showing how intensely he was interested. Lastly he took out a newspaper, opened it, and read a marked advertisement, which caused his eyes to open widely.

"I am even in better luck than you are, old friend," he said. "By the death of my uncle in Richmond, I am come into possession of a fortune, and here is an advertisement for me. I shall be a rich man, now, without the trouble of digging for gold. But this is the best of all," and he turned to the photograph.

"Is it a pictur'?" inquired Old Traps.

"Yes—the picture of Miss Staunton, the young lady who is in the clutches of Rattling Dick. The young man who gave you the bag to bring to me is her brother. If you have any plan, old man, or any sort of an idea that will help us to get them out of that trouble, I hope you will soon set it at work."

"It has been growin', my boy, and I think it is about ripe now. But the Judge don't know what we are talkin' about, I reckon."

"I suppose not, and I had better explain it to him."

"Perhaps you may as well wait until I finish what I had to tell you," suggested Aleck Withers. "From what you have been saying, I am inclined to think that my business may work in with yours."

Ashby restored the photograph to the canvas bag, and carefully placed the bag in an inside pocket of his coat, and he and Ben Durk listened attentively while the Judge proceeded to make another revelation.

"You both remember the robbing of the mail last February. There was considerable stir made about it at the time, because the mail was quite a valuable one. That job was charged to Rattling Dick; but there was no getting at him, and the matter was dropped. I had an interest in that mail, though it didn't amount to much. I had sent a letter to the East, with five \$50 bills in it. That went with the rest, and when I was satisfied that it was lost, I wrote another, and thought no more about it.

"The other day something happened that set me to thinking about it again. Kentucky Jack, who has his sleeping

quarters up at the head of the Gulch, has been under the weather lately, sick with a sort of remittent fever, and Calvin Peaslee has been attending on him. Kentuck always despised Peaslee, but said that he was bound to have some sort of a doctor, or it wouldn't seem natural to be sick. I went up to his cabin, to see how sick the old sinner had made him, and found some powders that Peaslee had left there, done up in white papers. Kentuck had taken two of them, and the papers were on the floor. I happened to pick up one, and noticed that there was writing on one side of it. My handwriting is rather queer, I confess, and I recognized it at once. I picked up the other, and opened those that still had powders in them, and it didn't take me long to discover that they were parts of the very letter which I had sent in the mail that Rattling Dick got. I didn't say a word to Kentuck about it, but changed the powders into other papers, and carried away those when I went.

"That made me have some strange thoughts about Calvin Peaslee, but my thoughts were stranger yet when I went to Beaver the next day. I had clipped a bit out of each of the bills that I inclosed in my letter. In Beaver I had some business at Hahn's grocery store, and he paid me some money. Among the bills was a fifty with a clipped corner, and I knew it at once. I asked Hahn where he got it, and he told me that it had been paid to him by Calvin Peaslee. That was enough for me, and you may bet high that I kept the bill.

"The bill would not have amounted to much by itself, as Peaslee might have received it in the way of trade. The scraps of paper would not have amounted to much by themselves, as he might have picked the letter up somewhere—though that is not at all likely; but when it comes to tracing the letter and one of the bills to the same man, that looks like pretty strong circumstantial evidence."

"Evidence of what?" inquired Ashby. "Do you suppose that Calvin Peaslee robbed the mail?"

"That don't follow. I don't suppose that he is Rattling Dick, and I do suppose that he is by no means the style of man who would openly take a hand in such a game; but my circumstantial evidence leads me to believe that he must have been mixed up in the business in some way. Since I got on

this trial, it is astounding what a number of little facts I have recalled that point in the same direction. Besides those odds and ends, you know, both of you, that he always has plenty of money to loan, much more than he ever got out of what he calls his practice. He is often absent from the camp, days together, and no one is fool enough to believe that he spends all that time in doctoring. When Captain Clawson's boy, who came out to see him, was picked up by Rattling Dick, you know that ransom money was paid, and that the affair was managed through Calvin Peaslee. Of course, the Rattler has his tools and confederates scattered about, and he can't get along without some one to attend to what I may call his outside business. We have heard that there is one man in his crowd who is called the Old Coyote. I don't mean to say that Calvin Peaslee is that individual, but he is coyote enough to claim the name."

"What you say is all very reasonable," remarked Ashby, "and the only question with me is what do you mean to do about it?"

"I mean to get some proof. What I have is enough to satisfy any reasonable jury; but I want to nail him down tight. If it can be proved that he is connected with Rattling Dick, a vigilance committee will be next in order. We will take possession of all of his property that can be got at, and divide it out among the sufferers, like the estate of a bankrupt. After that, the best thing the committee can do with him will be to string him up, as a warning to others."

"How do you expect to get the proof?"

"Old Peaslee will be watched from this on. I have not mentioned the matter to any one but Shasta Dick and you two, and I am sure that you will keep it close. Shasta Dick holds a grudge against the doctor, and will attend to his part of the business. Then the half-breed chap, John Smith, is to be looked after. There's a Shoshonie boy named Peter—reckon you know him—who comes about the camp sometimes, and who loves the half-breed pretty much as I love snakes. He is to be put on the trail of John Smith, and you may bet your bottom dollar that he will stick to it. That is all that has been settled on, so far, and now I would like to hear about the business you mentioned a while ago."

CHAPTER X.

OLD TRAPS' STORY.

THE revelations of Aleck Withers were listened to with interest and no little surprise by Henry Ashby and Ben Durk. When the Judge had finished his statement in regard to Calvin Peaslee, Ashby told of the capture of Clara and Turner Staunton, and related the particulars of the trip with Maddox, which had resulted in the discovery of Rattling Dick's den. He said nothing concerning Maddox' intention to personate the parson of Lost Diggings, but assured the Judge that that individual could be relied upon to assist in any campaign against Rattling Dick, provided it should not interfere with his own arrangements.

"A man of that style is just the article we want," said the Judge. "As I supposed, your business and mine will work together, and we can play into each other's hands quite naturally. If I can prove that Peaslee is the chap who is known as the Old Coyote, we will lay hands on the cuss, and can probably force Rattling Dick to give up your friends. He would rather do that than lose such a useful member of his gang as the Old Coyote must have been."

"There is a prospect in that," replied Ashby; "but it is 'most too far off to suit me. It is as yet uncertain what may be proved against Peaslee, and it will take time to get the evidence, and some more time would be required for a negotiation on that basis. In the meantime, what may not happen to my friends, the Stauntons? We know that Rattling Dick has left an order at Lost Diggings for a parson to be sent to him, and I can guess what that means."

"True enough, my boy. My business is all well enough in its way; but the chances are that it won't come in play soon enough to get your friends out of their scrape. Something must be done, and I can't guess what. You say that that there is no chance to get into Rattling Dick's den?"

"None that I can see. Ben Durk has hinted that he has

an idea which may help us out, and I am waiting as patiently as I can, to learn what it is."

"I told you that it has been growin', Harry, and that it is about ripe now," said the old man. "We will need good help in this business of ours, and this idea of mine will be apt to bring plenty of it. I shall have to tell you a sort of a story, and it must be kept a secret, like the rest of this affair. You may not find it easy to believe what I am going to tell; but it is all as true as gospel."

"Pile in, old man," suggested the Judge. "For one, I'm ready to believe every word that you may say."

"He must know that I will believe him," said A-hby.

"Well, folks, you have seen that I hadn't had much luck at minin'. I reckon I wasn't built up to dig for gold, and I hain't tried very hard to l'arn the business. When trappin' gave out, and huntin' didn't seem to pay, I took a hand at gold-diggin' now and then; but I was always like a fish out of water, and didn't take to it naterally and in 'arnest, as most others did. You wouldn't think, from what you know of me, I'd be a good hand at prospectin', or would be apt to discover new and rich diggin's. But that is the very thing that I have done, and it isn't very lately that I did it.

"It wasn't very long ago, to be sure, but before anybody thought of findin' gold about here, that I was trappin' near the hills, and doing well at it. I was alone; but that didn't bother me any. In fact, I thought it was better for me to be alone, as the Injuns would stand less chance to find me out and give me trouble. But they did git on my trail, and hunted me down, and then I had to git up and scatter.

"They ran foul of me one mornin', when I was lookin' arter my traps that were set in a creek that both of you know. Thar war at least twenty red-skins in the crowd, and I had to trust to my legs to save my life. Like a bird that has a nest full of young-'uns near by, I ran in a direction that would lead 'em away from my cabin and hoss and fixin's, and struck into the hills. I was a powerful good runner then—and am yet, for that matter—and I kept well ahead of the r'arin' and howlin' pack, until I came to a place, pretty high up, whar the mountain was cut right straight down, and rose before me like a wall.

"Thar didn't seem to be any chance to get around it, and I allowed that I was stumped when I got to that place; but, as luck would have it, thar was a narrow gap through the rock, and you may bet high that I piled into that mighty rapid; for the reds were close behind.

"If I had been two men, I might have kept the critters out of that gap easy enough; but I couldn't do much with only one shot. So I just ran through, and came out in one of the delightfulest places that any human ever sot eyes onto. It was a green valley, with splendid trees growin' in it, and a beautiful, clear brook runnin' right through the middle of it. But that valley was closed in by hills that nobody would ever think of climbin', and the gap was the only way to get in or out of it.

"I was stumped ag'in; but I had to think quick, and it struck me, all of a sudden, that that brook must git out somewhere. So I ran down it, keepin' in the water to hide my trail, until I came to the rock at the lower end of the valley, and thar I saw that the brook ran into a hole at the foot of the cliff.

"Thar didn't seem to be any more than room enough for the brook as it went into the hole; but I allowed that I could go through it if the water could, and so I soused in, head foremost, and wriggled into the hole. I couldn't have been out of sight more'n half a minute, when the red-skins came yellin' and screechin' through the gap.

"It seemed like a mighty tight place, and I thought I was goin' to be drowned at first; but I soon got my head above the water, and perceived that I not only had room enough to breathe in, but nearly enough to stand up in. So I waded on a little further, and came out in another valley that looked as if it might be a chunk broken off from the other one; but it was much smaller, and thar wasn't any great sight of green stuff in it."

"Thinkin' the Injuns might smell me out and foller me, I picked up a good-sized rock, as the charge in my rifle was wet, and waded back to the narrowest part of the hole, whar I waited, ready to cave in the first head that should show itself. But no red-skin showed his snout at me, and I concluded, at last, that they had given up the thing and gone

away. But I was in no sort of a hurry to show myself. I knew when I was well off, and wasn't forgetful of the tricks of the red sarpints.

"While I sorter kept an eye on the place whar the water came out, I looked about that valley wishin' I had somethin' to eat, as I was powerful hungry arter my long run. I was thirsty, too, and I went to the brook, when I had got tired of watchin' the hole, and kneeled down to git a drink.

"The ground was sandy all along the brook, and I saw somethin' shinin' in the sand when I kneeled down, and picked it out. It was a big scale of gold, though I didn't know it then. As I said, nobody thought of findin' gold in these parts at that time, and I wouldn't have guessed that any such luck could happen to me. But the scale was a pretty thing, and I looked for more. I found 'em—some bigger, and some smaller—but I left 'em all thar.

"Thar was no gittin' out of that valley but by the way I had come, as the brook made a jump clear out of creation, through a streak in the rock at the other end. As soon as I thought it safe to do so, I crawled back, and passed out of the first valley through the gap. I got back to my cabin in safety, and found that it and the boss hadn't been interfered with; and then I was happy, though the Injuns had carried off a lot of my traps.

"Arter gold was found in these parts, I took a hand at minin', and l'arned what the stuff looked like, and what sort of places it was found in, and how to dig for it. As a matter of course, this made me remember that valley in the mountains, and I went up thar to take a look at it.

"When I got into it, I knew at once that it was a reg'lar pocket, and that thar must be heaps and heaps of gold hid away thar. I dug and washed a little of the dirt, and picked out a few fair-sized nuggets, which I showed to a Jew at Beaver, but didn't tell him whar they came from. He told me the stuff was pure gold, and paid me the worth of it, and was satisfied. I had found out what I wanted to know, and was sure that I had a fortune in that place, whenever I should take a notion to pick it up."

"Why haven't you picked it up?" asked Aleck Withers, who had been intensely interested in the narration.

"For several reasons. I couldn't go thar alone and dig, because I would be watched, and the pocket would soon be found out. Might have taken a partner or so, but didn't happen to come across anybody who suited me. Then, ag'in, I had no want of money, and was quite sure that no one would crawl into the place as I had. I preferred to leave it waitin' until I should find some one with whom I should care to divide. If I should be in great want, or should need a big pile of money for any use, I knew that I could git it by sellin' out that discovery; but I have never said a word about it until this day."

"That is a big thing," said Ashby, rather impatiently; "but I can't imagine what it has to do with Miss Staunton and her brother, or with Rattling Dick."

"I suppose you will admit, Harry, that if people knew whar that pocket is, they would git at it, no matter what might be in the way."

"No doubt of that."

"The only thing in the way is Rattlin' Dick. The gap I spoke of is the same one that was at the end of the trail we follered up into the mountains. The first valley that I told you about is Rattlin' Dick's head-quarters, and the pocket jines it."

"Perhaps Rattling Dick has found his way into the pocket," suggested Ashby.

"Are you goin' crazy, my boy? If he had, he would have quit stoppin' stages afore this, and the find would have been bound to leak out in some way. No fear of that, Harry. The pocket can't be got at without goin' through Rattlin' Dick's place and cleanin' out him and his crew. You both know that people will do, in order to git at a big find of gold, things that they wouldn't do for love or any reasonable amount of money. We have no need for a large crowd, and don't want 'em. A dozen good and detarmined men, with ourselves, can do the job, and I think we can git 'em."

"Not a bit of doubt of that!" exclaimed the Judge.

"Reckon not. When we git into the pocket, we can stake it off to suit ourselves, and I only want to bargain, beforehand, for two claims for myself. Do you think the folks will make any objection to that?"

"Not the least. You can get as many volunteers as you want on those terms, and the only question is, whom we shall choose. I would like to take Shasta Dick as one. I would risk him to get into any place in creation, if he was sure there was gold in it."

Old Traps looked dubious.

"I will strike him off, if you say so."

"No. I will leave it all to you, Judge. I know that you are a good judge of men, and that you can be trusted with that part of the business. Pick the men as you please, and I promise you that I won't object to any one of them."

"I would like to put in a word," remarked Ashby. "I hope that whatever is to be done in this matter may be done as speedily as possible."

"Of course. That is well understood among us."

CHAPTER XI.

BY THE WAYSIDE.

ALECK WITHERS was no less eager than Ashby and Ben Durk to make his way into the "pocket" of which the old man had told him.

As "money makes the mare go," so will the prospect of a big find compel gold-miners who have become infatuated with their pursuit to make exertions and perform deeds that no other inducement could persuade them to.

The Judge set at work at once to pick the men for the enterprise. As he had said, there was no difficulty in the matter except as to whom he should choose. He first made a confidant of Shasta Dick, who was fully as eager to enter into the arrangement as the Judge had supposed he would be.

"You needn't say another word about it, Judge," said the gentleman from Shasta, when Withers had assured him that the statement of Old Traps might be confidently relied upon. "I know all I want to know, and believe the story as fully as if I had found the pocket myself. Of course I will go into

the job, and will be glad of the chance. As for Rattlin' Dick, we will soon find a way to rattle him out of there, or we don't deserve ever to have a cent."

The joint judgment of Aleck Withers, Henry Ashby and Shasta Dick decided the men who were to be selected, and the project was carefully broached to them. The location of the "pocket" was not stated, and the nature of the obstacle that must be removed before it could be reached was not explained; but enough was told to convince them that a rich find could be secured, and that no little skill, as well as daring and resolution, would be required of those who should enter into possession of it.

No scheme that could have been devised would have more easily excited the imaginations of the miners. It contained the elements of mystery, romance, adventure and profit, and those who were selected eagerly embraced the proposition as soon as it was offered to them.

A meeting of the twelve chosen men was held at Aleck Withers' cabin, and the details of the enterprise were explained to them by the Judge and Henry Ashby. Ben Durk was not present. As Shasta Dick expressed it, the old man had "soured on the Gulch," and it was not to be expected that he would be willing to show himself among the people who had treated him so harshly.

His absence did not prevent the acceptance of the scheme. The word of Aleck Withers was "good for any amount," and Henry Ashby's honor was beyond question. Whatever was believed by those two easily obtained credence among the others. In fact, if the enterprise had been unreasonable or extravagant, the miners would not have hesitated to rush into it blindly. So many wonderful discoveries had been made, and so many improbable tales had proved to be true, that any wild scheme was sure to find followers, who were willing to stake their lives upon its success.

This was no wild scheme, and the tale told by Old Traps was not at all improbable, but such as might easily find favor with the most sober and experienced gold-diggers. The company—if such it might be called—was soon formed, and the members bound themselves to each other by a solemn pledge of secrecy and faithfulness.

It was at night that this meeting was held, and Henry Ashby, although the hour was late, determined to ride to Freeze-out, for the purpose of informing Ben Dark of what had been accomplished.

The moon was shining, and the path was one with which he was well acquainted, and he rode along leisurely so as not to tire his horse, until he had left Diamond Gulch several miles behind him.

He had reached a place where the trail ran along the foot of a hill, skirted on the right by a thicket, when his horse shied as a man started out from the bushes ahead of him.

Before Ashby had time to discover what had caused his horse to make such a sudden bolt, there was the sharp report of a rifle, and a bullet whizzed by his head. He was thankful then that the action of the horse had interfered with the aim of his assailant, and had thus saved his life.

The man who fired the shot at once darted into the thicket, and was lost to sight. Ashby could only fire his pistol into the bushes, with the hope that a chance shot might hit the fugitive; but the shots only had the effect of increasing the speed of the would-be assassin, as he crashed through the thicket in the direction of the hill.

Ashby waited where he was, expecting that the fugitive would soon make his appearance on the hillside; but he neither saw nor heard him again, and concluded to resume his journey.

As he was about to start, he heard a shrill whistle behind him, which caused him to stop again and look around.

A voice followed the whistle, and his name was called distinctly.

"Come out and show yourself," he said, "whoever you are."

"Don't shoot!" was the reply. "I am a friend."

Some one came running down the trail, with swift but noiseless steps, and Ashby soon perceived that it was Peter the young Shoshonie, of whom Aleck withers had spoken when he made his revelation concerning Calvin Peaslee.

"What are you doing here, Peter?" he asked.

"I am on the trail of that man who fired at you."

"Who is he?"

"I will tell you, if you promise not to kill him."

"How can you ask me not to kill a man who has just tried to take my life?"

"Shasta Dick says that he mustn't be hurt."

"I think I can guess who he is, then. Well, if Shasta Dick says that he mustn't be hurt, I will not hurt him, unless I am obliged to do so in self-defense. Is John Smith the man?"

"Yes. I am to keep on the trail of John Smith, and to see where he goes, and to tell Shasta Dick or the Judge everything he does; but I am not to kill him, as they want him to live until they find out something."

"That is right. For my part, I will try to keep out of his way, and hope he won't get on my trail again. He nearly saved me this time."

Ashby rode on, and Peter plunged into the thicket.

The morning that succeeded this adventure, a few hours after it occurred, found Ben Durk at the distance of about a dozen miles from Freeze-out.

A day and a night were always sufficient to weary the old man of such a metropolis as Freeze out. He fancied neither its fare nor its sleeping accommodations, and always felt himself "cabined, cribbed, and confined" within its limits. So he concluded, during the absence of Ashby and Maddox, that he would enjoy a hunt.

Meeting with poor luck, and not wishing to return to Freeze-out, he determined to spend the night out in "the open." Accordingly, he wrapped himself in his blanket, laid down under a tree, near which he had tethered his horse, and slept soundly until morning.

At daylight he arose from his earthy couch, and was peering about the vicinity, looking for water, when he caught sight of a man, whose suspicious movements attracted his attention.

He at once concealed himself, and watched this man, whom he shortly recognized as John Smith, the half-breed servant or assistant of Calvin Peaslee.

The half-breed with the uncommon name was sneaking along in a sort of gully, or depression of the ground, partly concealed by bushes. He carried a rifle in his right hand, and glanced toward the east now and then, as if looking for

somebody. Suddenly he stopped, crouched at the edge of the gully, and raised his rifle.

At that moment Old Traps heard the tread of a horse, and conjectured that an assassination was about to be attempted. From behind the tree that concealed him he leveled his rifle at the half-breed. Then the horse whose tread he had heard came into view, and he recognized the rider.

It was Henry Ashby, and John Smith's rifle was pointed at him as soon as he appeared. Old Traps was "itching" to send a bullet through the head of the wretch, but quickly came to the conclusion that it would be better to spare his life, thwart his purpose, and capture him, if possible. He took a careful aim, watching the half-breed's rifle-barrel and every motion he made.

John Smith was also drawing a fine bead, and his aim was directed at the head of Henry Ashby. The tigerish gleam of his eye told that he was determined not to lose his shot this time.

As his finger was about to press the trigger, a rifle cracked behind him, and his own weapon, struck by a bullet, was dashed from his hand, discharging itself harmlessly.

Before the astonished half-breed, who was nearly stunned by this unexpected attack, could recover his senses sufficiently to rise and look about, Old Traps, with a shout to Ashby, had sprung out from his concealment, and pounced upon him like a hawk upon a chicken. The half-breed struggled vainly in his grasp, and Ashby, who had hastened to alight and run to the spot, assisted the old man to bind his prisoner.

"Now, then," said Ben Durk, as he seated himself before the captive, "tell us all about it."

"All about what?" was the sullen reply of John Smith.

"You know what I mean. Why have you been tryin' to take the life of this gentleman?"

"This is not the first time," suggested Ashby. "He fired at me about midnight, a long distance from here."

"That makes the matter worse. Thar must be some p'int to the joke, and I want you to tell me, Smithy, what it is."

"What's the use?" asked the half-breed.

"Here's the use. You have been caught in the act, and we have you foul. Death is the penalty, as you know; but

"We will let you go free, if you will tell us why you have done this, and will promise not to do so any more."

The half-breed's eyes glistened. He had expected death, and looked for no mercy.

"Will you let me go free, then?" he asked.

"Yes. I can promise for both of us. Can't I, Ashby?"

Ashby nodded.

"Tell us then, Smithy, who set you on to this?"

"The doctor did."

"The doctor set you on to do what?"

"To kill him," pointing to Ashby.

"What for?"

"I don't know. The doctor hates him, and wants him dead, and promised me big money if I would kill him."

"You don't know why the doctor hates him?"

"No."

"And that is all you know about it?"

"Every bit; except that I am afraid of the doctor, and have to do whatever he wants me to do. He would p'ison me if he knew that I told you this."

"If he ever finds it out, we will see to it that he shan't hurt you for tellin'. You may go now, Smithy, and you mustn't try any more such tricks. If you do, death ain't a patchin' to what will happen to you."

The half-breed was loosed, and he picked up his rifle, and sneaked away. Ben Durk and Ashby got their horses, mounted and rode toward Freeze-out.

"Have you any idee what sort of a grudge it is that that doctor chap has ag'inst you, Harry?" asked Old Traps.

"Not the least. What that fellow told us is the first intimation I have had that I have an enemy in that quarter; but I believe the half-breed spoke the truth. I am inclined to think that Peaslee will show in strange colors, if he is ever fully found out."

"I believe so, too. It's mighty queer that he should pitch onto you. I can't see into it at all."

"Nor I; and there is another matter that I don't understand. I can't imagine how it is that you, having a big find, which is all your own, should be willing to give it up and

divide it out, for the sake of two people whom you don't know, whom you have never even seen."

"Nothing strange about that, my boy. I have reserved two claims, and that's as much as I could expect to hold, any way. I would have to take somebody in with me, and I couldn't get a set of men who would suit me better—especially you, Harry. I feel mighty sorry for those two young folks, and would do any thin' in the world to help 'em. Besides that, Rattlin' Dick has got to be rattled out of that den afore anybody else can git into it."

"In short, you have taken it upon yourself to be a public benefactor. I can only say that you are the most generous man of my acquaintance."

"Nonsense! Thar's nothin' strange about that, I tell you. Let's ride a little faster."

CHAPTER XII.

ANOTHER STAGE ADVENTURE.

JAMES MADDUX was accepted as a member of the "company," of which Old Traps might be called the "promoter," and Aleck Withers the president. Maddux disclaimed all prospective interest in the "pocket," and only asked permission to work with the rest to gain his own ends, which he did not think it necessary to explain definitely. A single interview made his comrades acquainted with him, and one and all declared that he was a fine fellow, exactly the man for the business, and that they would be glad and proud of his company and assistance.

He said nothing to them concerning his intention of personating the Parson of Lost Diggings, that being a secret which he had confided only to Ashby and Old Traps; but he listened to all their plans, and made some suggestions to which even their experience could take no exceptions.

The idea of getting evidence against Calvin Peaslee, and of using him as a lever with which to move Rattling Dick

and his crew, was a good one, in his opinion; but it would take a long time to carry it into execution, and the emergency demanded immediate action.

Maddox, furthermore, was not ashamed to confess to Ashby and Old Traps, that he was by no means fascinated by the idea of venturing alone into the den of the mountain outlaws. He was bound to get in there, and he felt sure that his plan of personating the Parson would secure him the *entree*; but he was willing to admit that he would much rather make his appearance in that valley under other auspices and with fewer odds against him. He had not the least objection to trying some other mode of accomplishing his purpose, and to that end he set his wits at work.

The hostility of Calvin Peaslee to Henry Ashby, which had caused the attempts upon the life of the latter, was one thing that he was glad to hear of. On the supposition that Peaslee was interested in Rattling Dick's affairs, he thought that that hostility might be used as an important element in future operations.

He thus constructed a plan, which he laid before the "company," and which they took hold of with avidity, and proceeded to carry it out.

The evening that preceded the morning on which the stage was to leave Freeze-out for Beaver, Henry Ashby happened to announce, while standing in front of the hotel at Freeze-out, that he intended to leave for the East the next day.

"Ain't this a rather sudden move of yours, Harry?" asked an acquaintance.

"Rather sudden," was the reply. "I have lately learned that I have fallen heir to a pretty big pile in the way of a fortune in Virginia, and I am obliged to go and prove my claim and take possession of the property."

"Going by stage?"

"Yes—in the morning."

"What do you mean to do with your claim and your dust?"

"My claim is about worked out. My dust I shall take with me, as far as Beaver, if no further."

"Isn't that a little dangerous? Rattling Dick is not dead yet, so far as heard from."

"He seems to have quit business, though. I am not giving myself any uneasiness concerning Rattling Dick."

There were those who thought that Ashby might be expected to feel some uneasiness concerning Rattling Dick, and that it was at least indiscreet in him to announce his intention of going to Beaver by stage, with valuable property in his possession. It was generally believed that the mountain outlaw had agents or spies at each end of the route and at the several stations, by whom he was promptly informed of any facts that would enable him to "make a haul," and it was to be supposed that he would soon be put in possession of such intelligence as that which was openly announced by Henry Ashby.

That young gentleman, however, seemed to give no thought to the subject, or not to be in the least annoyed by it. He completed his preparations for the journey, and seated himself in the stage the next morning, taking inside a valise that seemed to be unusually heavy.

There was only one other passenger—an old man who had come in from "up country" during the night, and whom nobody knew. The driver was Jack Sleeth, the same man who had driven the stage when James Maddox, with Turner and Clara Staunton, had rode from Beaver toward Freeze-out.

When the stage was about ten miles from Freeze-out, four masked men jumped out from the cover of some bushes at the side of the road, and ordered the driver to halt. They were afoot, and all were well armed.

The driver was undoubtedly astonished. He reined in his horses, and stared wildly at the masked men, as if he did not know what to say or do. The two passengers inside were as quiet as if the interruption had been nothing unusual or unexpected.

"I don't understand this," said Jack Sleeth, at last. "Who are you, anyhow, and what are you doin' here?"

"Never mind who we are," replied the man who had ordered the stage to halt. "Just you keep that team standing there until we get in. We are going to take a ride with you."

Jack Sleeth did as he was ordered to do, and three of the men entered the stage, while the other climbed up and seated himself by the side of the driver.

The last-named individual carried a large blanket over his shoulders, and wore a long and heavy mask, by which his features were completely concealed. He laid his rifle aside, and drew a pistol from his belt.

"Look a here, Jack Sleeth," he said. "I know you and your tricks. If you say any thing, or make any sign, or give any sort of a hint to anybody on the way, to let them know that we four men are in the stage, you will have to take a pile out of this box. Do you understand?"

"Ye-es," muttered the bewildered driver. "Who are you, anyhow? What does this thing mean?"

"None of your business. All you have to do is to obey orders, and that you had better do, or woe be unto you! Now you may drive on."

The masked man dropped down in front of the box seat, and spread his blanket over himself, presenting the appearance of a pile of packages that had been covered up there. Jack Sleeth puckered his mouth as if to whistle, but restrained his propensity, cracked his whip, and let the horses out along the level road.

The passengers inside the stage remained quiet, he on the outside was also silent, and nothing occurred to vary the monotony of the journey, until the mouth of Wild Rose was reached, where Turner Staunton and his sister had been captured.

Then four men, mounted and masked, showed themselves ahead of the stage, and two others rode in behind it. Rifles and pistols were pointed at the driver, and a harsh voice ordered him to halt. As he had already pulled the horses up short, the order was hardly necessary.

"Who in thunder are *you*?" he asked. "What do you want to stop me for?"

"You know well enough who we are and what we want," was the reply. "Is there a man named Henry Ashby in the stage?"

"Tell him yes," prompted the man under the blanket, as the driver hesitated.

"Yes; he is here."

"Tell him to throw his weapons out on the ground, and to step out of the stage."

Jack Sleeth, prompted by the man under the blanket,

repeated the command to Ashby, and then looked about, as if he would gladly find some hole to crawl into, so that he might be out of the way of the "scrimmage" which he perceived was about to take place.

Suddenly the doors of the stage were thrown open, and a shot was fired from each side. Then the five who were inside, including Henry Ashby and the old man, jumped out and began to handle their weapons in the most lively manner imaginable. The confederate on top threw off his blanket, snatched his rifle, and proceeded to "pitch in" without descending from his position. Jack Sleeth was about to jump down; but a word from the man at his side kept him in his place, and he had as much as he could do to hold the frightened and struggling horses.

This unexpected attack took the road-agents completely by surprise, and they fired hastily and with bad aim, while their assailants were cool and collected. When one of their number had been knocked off his horse, and another had been severely wounded, they abandoned the fight, wheeled their horses, and fled toward the mountain.

As the victors were on foot, they were unable to pursue, and contented themselves with a parting shot. Then they hastened to examine the body of the man who had been killed.

"Do you know him, Judge?" asked Henry Ashby, when the mask was lifted from the face.

"Yes. His name is Budlong, and I have often seen him at Freeze-out. I would never have thought that he would be found in this business."

"We may yet meet some others who would not be suspected. This man must have died as soon as he was struck, and at least one of the others has gone off pretty badly hurt."

"I don't see why you couldn't have told me what you were up to," remarked Jack Sleeth, from his post. "What do you want me to do now? Are you going to git back into this here stage, or any of you?"

"No," replied the man who had been addressed as Judge. "You can just drive along toward Beaver."

"How about your valise full of gold-dust, Mr. Ashby?"

"You may keep the valise, if you want it; but you will have to empty out the stones."

The driver felt like giving utterance to a prolonged whistle, and did not restrain himself this time.

"All a plant," he muttered. Then he gathered up his lines, and cracked his whip, and the horses started off as if they were glad to get away from Wild Rose Pass.

"Are we not going to follow those people up into the hills?" asked the old man, who had shown as much activity and courage during the *melee* as any one.

"What's the use?" replied the Judge. "Our friends at the other end of the trail will be on the watch, and will attend to them."

"But we may as well go up. We will want to see our friends and learn how the affair turns out."

"I agree with Mr. Maddox," said Ashby. "Those rascals can't whip Old Traps and his party, and they must be either killed or taken prisoners, and I am curious to see them. The door of their den may be open, too, and we all want to get in there. I think we had better push out in that direction."

"Very well," assented the Judge. "Let us put this chap under the ground, and then we will start."

A shallow hole was dug, in which the body of Budlong was placed. The hole was then filled up, and a pile of stones thrown on top of it, and the robber's tomb was complete.

The men who were disguised removed their masks, and all walked up into the hills, Ashby and Maddox leading the way; but it was not until late in the evening that they came in sight of the gap that formed the entrance to Rattling Dick's den. Considerable comment had been provoked by the fact that they met none of their friends on the way, and they were yet more surprised at finding everything quiet at the end of the trail.

At the suggestion of Aleck Withers, one of their number gave utterance to a call, resembling the cry of the wildcat, and nine men came out from different places of concealment, foremost among whom were Ben Durk and Shasta Dick.

"What's the matter, Judge?" asked the latter. "Haven't you seen any thin' of Rattling Dick?"

"Yes. We had a fight with him, or with some of his gang. We killed one, and crippled another. Haven't they come up here?"

"Nary one. We have waited for 'em until we are e'en 'most tired out; but not a sign have we seen of any livin' human comin' from below."

"That is strange. They ran away from us, and we supposed that you would surely catch them at this end of the trail. They must have given us the slip down below, and we failed to notice the place where they turned off. Perhaps they have not gone back, and we can get in through the gap now."

"No use to try that, Judge. We made a move that way, and the bullets came flyin' out right lively."

"There's another entrance, besides that gap," remarked Maddox.

"That's what the matter is," said Traps. "I wouldn't have thought it; but it's so."

"Well, my friends, whatever you do, it will be necessary to find the other entrance. You may pick up the trail that we lost to-day, or you may force Peaslee or his men to show you the other hole that those rascals crawl in at; but it must be found in some way. For my part, I know what I mean to do."

Ben Durk and Ashby understood that their partner intended to play the part of the Parson who was wanted by Rattling Dick.

As nothing could be done then and there, the two parties joined, and started to retrace their steps down the mountain

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CAPTIVES.

TURNER STAUNTON did not attempt to conceal his indignation when he and his sister were captured by the mountain outlaws but it made itself manifest only in his flushed face

and in the angry looks with which he regarded his captors, as his sister's restraining glance and touch prevented him from speaking his mind.

In silence he watched the receding stage, and gazed at the rough figures of the outlaws, striving to determine what manner of men they were, and what sort of faces were concealed by their masks; but he could not perceive that they differed in any material particular from the miners and mountain men whom he had met during his journey through that wild region.

He submitted quietly to a search for weapons, which resulted in the removal of his pistol from the belt in which he kept it, and the abstraction of a pocket-knife from his pocket. Then a horse, provided with a side-saddle, was led up to Clara, and she was directed to mount. She did so, with the assistance of her brother, and he mounted the horse that was assigned to him.

Two of the outlaws rode off toward the hills, and Turner Staunton and his sister were directed to follow them. Then came two more mounted men, and after them three men on foot, carrying the baggage of the captives, which was not heavy or unwieldy.

In this order they passed among the foot-hills, and up into the mountains, on the trail that Old Traps and his two friends followed, later in the day. They passed through the gap in the cliff, and their eyes opened in surprise and admiration at the scene that was then spread before them.

A scene of a beautiful valley, there in the heart of the hills—green and luxuriant, with bright flowers blooming among the rich grasses, and lofty trees scattered here and there—flowing through the center a clear brook, whose waters were suggestive of coolness and purity—the whole shut in by lofty and rugged mountains, forming an impenetrable barrier against all intrusion—no entrance except by the narrow gap through which they had come, and which was guarded by armed men. The signs of human occupation consisted of several horses that were grazing on the green sward, two tents, such as were in use among the miners, and two rude log cabins.

The captives would have greatly enjoyed the view of this

valley, if they had not been captives. As it was, they were compelled to admire it as a beautiful prison, escape from which seemed to be impossible.

Little was said during the journey, and the outlaws did not remove their masks until they reached the tents, when all but one of them uncovered, the baggage was placed near one of the tents, the prisoners were directed to dismount, and the horses were led away. Turner Staunton scrutinized the faces of those who removed their masks, but learned nothing from them, and directed his attention to the man who had not uncovered.

"Sit down," said this individual. "I am sorry that I have no better seats to offer you than the grass; but it is dry and clean, and you might have a worse resting-place."

Clara seated herself, as she was really fatigued, upon a small leather trunk that formed a portion of the baggage, and her brother remained standing. The words that were spoken caused a glance of wonder to pass between them, as if there might be something familiar in the tones of the voice. Again they looked carefully at their captor, and saw a well-formed man, of the medium size, rather coarsely dressed. The small portion of his face that was visible was very swarthy, and the few locks of hair that could be seen under his broad hat, were as black as jet.

"I hope you will make yourselves at home," continued the outlaw. "You will probably remain here a long time, and you had better try to be as contented and comfortable as possible."

"Perhaps you will have the kindness to tell us what this means," said Turner Staunton, in suppressed and measured tones. "Who are you? Why have we been forcibly seized and brought here? How long do you expect to detain us?"

"Too many questions at once; but I am inclined to believe that you will find an answer to all of them when I answer the first."

The outlaw took off his hat, permitting a mass of raven-black hair to fall down upon his shoulders, and removed his mask, disclosing a countenance as dark as that of a mulatto with black, twinkling eyes, and thick, protrusive lips.

Clara Staunton turned pale, and started up in affright.

"Black Dick Hundsden!" exclaimed Turner, on whose brow a dark frown had gathered.

"The same," replied the outlaw, with an unpleasant smile. "Your old acquaintance and friend. It can hardly be surprising to you that I should want to see my Virginia neighbors. As I could not suppose that you would take the trouble to call on me, even if you had known where to find me, I thought it best to bring you here."

"With what purpose?" inquired Turner.

"Can't you guess? You know that I am an old lover of your sister's, and—"

Before the outlaw could finish the sentence, Turner Staunton clenched his fist and rushed at him, with a wrathful exclamation; but two of the men who were standing near leaped forward and seized him before he could reach their chief. At the suggestion of Rattling Dick, they tied his hands behind his back, and led him to the side of his sister.

"As you seem inclined to be violent," said the outlaw, "you must be restrained until you learn how to behave yourself. You know that I was a lover of your sister's. I am willing to admit that she never seemed to fancy me; but, at one time, she promised to marry me."

"It is false!" exclaimed Clara. "You know that I refused even to speak to you. I once made a conditional promise to marry you; but it was not given to you."

"It was a promise, as far as it went. We won't quarrel about trifles."

"The promise, such as it was, was made to my father. He said that Levi Hundsden would save him from ruin if I would marry his son. On that condition I consented; but my father soon learned that it was the rascality of Levi Hundsden that had caused his ruin, and he released me from my promise."

"Very well. You needn't throw any hard words at my respected parent. They can't hit him, and wouldn't hurt if they should. I have reason to know that the old man played his cards very shrewdly, and he is still playing a sharp game. It was through him that I learned that you were coming in this direction, and when you might be expected to arrive. My agents have been watching you during the latter part of your

journey, and I was ready to seize you as soon as you should come within reach of this home of mine."

"My brother asked you what your purpose is, and I repeat the question."

"Again I ask you if you can't guess. I have not forgotten that I love you, or that you have refused to become my wife. You shall not have a chance to refuse me again. I will command you to marry me, and you must obey. Since you have come into these parts, you may have heard of a man named Rattling Dick, and my word is law where I travel. I know that you were once in love with Henry Ashby, and I suppose you are still wrapped up in him; but you might as well be wrapped up in a dead man."

"Why do you say that?" quickly asked Clara, to whom the tone and manner of the outlaw were suggestive of danger to the only man she ever loved.

"Because Henry Ashby is in as bad a box as his worst enemy could wish him to get in. He has had the bad luck to fall heir to his uncle's large property in Virginia, and there is a condition in the will. Do you know what it is?"

"Yes. He must appear and claim the property within two years from the date of Carrol Hundsdon's death."

"Precisely. If he don't it goes to Levi Hundsdon, my father. Under those circumstances, you may consider it a dead sure thing that he won't appear within two years or any other time. Knowing my respected parent as you do, as well as myself, you may be certain that we won't let all that property slip out of our hands. I have mentioned this to you, to show you that you have no earthly chance of marrying Henry Ashby and that you had better give in gracefully and marry me without any fuss, instead of obliging me to resort to compulsion."

"You may be sure that I will not marry you on any terms or under any circumstances," said Clara, who had fully recovered her composure.

"So you say now; but you will change your tone before you leave this place. In fact, you will never leave it, except as my wife. When you marry me, you will marry a rich man, and I will take you to the East or to Europe, where nothing is known of Rattling Dick, and where my money

will enable me to put on any amount of style. As for you, Turner Staunton, I propose to keep you only until I marry your sister, and then you shall be free to go wherever you please if you will bind yourself not to reveal any thing concerning Rattling Dick or this place. If I will untie your hands now, will you promise to attempt no violence toward me?"

Turner Staunton nodded an assent, as he was willing to agree to make no unavailing resistance.

"That is right. I will make you as comfortable here as I can, and I shall only ask you to be quiet and contented. As for getting away from here, why you might as well think of going to heaven in a balloon, as of escaping from this valley. There is no such thing as getting away from here, and you may as well make up your minds to that."

Turner's hands were unbound, and he and his sister were taken to one of the tents, which was to be their lodging-place. Into this their baggage was carried and they were left alone, until food was brought to them.

When they were again alone, they conversed seriously concerning their condition, and Turner expressed himself somewhat hopefully in view of the fact that he had sent a message from Beaver to Henry Ashby.

"How can that help us?" asked Clara.

"Ashby—if it is really he—will know that we are in this country, and will be likely to inquire after us. If he does, he will learn that we were captured and taken from the stage, and try to help us."

"Why should he? We are nothing to him now. What can he do? He stands between the Hundsdens and a large property, and his life is in danger every moment. You know what sort of a man Richard Hundsen is. He will assassinate Ashby, or cause his death in some manner."

"We may be nothing to him now; but I know that Harry Ashby is one of the truest and best fellows in the world. If he could get warning of his danger, I believe he would be able to protect himself, even against Black Dick Hundsen."

"How could any man help us now? You know that this place is a fortress that can not be taken. Even I can see that a few men can defend it against many."

"And yet, I can't help having some faith in Ashby. What's that, Clara? An alarm? Is it possible that he has found us out already?"

There was a loud whistle at the entrance, which was responded to from within—then a rifle-shot.

Clara smiled sadly.

"Some one shooting at game," she said. "I am afraid, Turner, that your hopes are too easily excited."

It was an alarm, beyond doubt, as men could be seen running toward the entrance; but all was quiet again after a few minutes.

After that day the captives were left free to wander about the little valley, confirming themselves in the belief that escape was impossible. They were respectfully treated by all the outlaws, and nothing important happened, until Rattling Dick presented himself before Clara Staunton, with an important communication.

"You may have thought that there was no such thing as a minister in this wild country," he said; "but I have found one. He will be here in a few days, and you may prepare yourself for that marriage. It is bound to come off."

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LION'S JAWS.

WHEN the stage-coach trap that had been laid for Rattling Dick failed to fully accomplish its object, James Maddox at once resolved to carry into effect his plan of personating the clergyman for whom the outlaw had left an order at Lost Diggings. This man of energy and determination was not to be thwarted in his purpose by any difficulties or danger but acted as if he meant to succeed, no matter what the cost might be. This is the sort of a resolution that carries a man right on to his ends, and enables him to triumph over obstacles that would be deemed insurmountable by those who stand back and survey them at a distance.

He confided his resolution to Ashby and Ben Durk, who in vain endeavored to dissuade him from it. He told them that he felt sure there was another entrance, besides the gap, to Rattling Dick's den, and advised them to lose no time in trying to find it. For his part, his path was plain, and there was nothing for him to do but to walk in it. It might be putting his head in the lion's mouth; but it was necessary that the animal's jaws should be opened, and he saw no other way of doing it.

So, early on the morning when the Parson expected by Rattling Dick was to leave Lost Diggings, Maddox left Freeze-out, and rode toward that settlement, meeting the man whom he sought, before he had traveled many miles.

The minister, who had already introduced himself to Maddox as Mr. Henshaw, was a middle-aged man, with a good, strong, honest face, who feared, as Maddox had already guessed, nothing but God. He shook hands cordially with the officer, and asked him whether he had concluded to abandon his purpose.

"Not a bit of it," replied Maddox. "I am more eager than ever for that business. I have tried one plan, which hasn't worked to my satisfaction, and this is next in order. I hope you are not disposed to go back on me."

"I will keep my promise, if you wish to go on. I am only alarmed for your safety."

"You mustn't let that trouble you. I am often obliged to take my life in my hands, and have never lost it yet. Had you thought of going there yourself, if I should refuse?"

"That was my intention. I thought that I ought to go, to save the people of Lost Diggings from any bad consequences. If that outlaw should wish to use me for any evil purpose, of course I would not lend myself to it, but would try to persuade him to forego it."

"Suppose you should not succeed in that?"

"I could only do my duty, and leave the result to Providence."

"He might try to compel you, or even take your life."

"You say that you are often obliged to take your life in your own hands. For my part, I leave my life in the hands of the Almighty. My only concern is to do my duty."

"Mr. Henshaw, you are a good man, a true man, a brave man. I am glad that I have met you. Whatever may happen to me, I shall remember you to honor you. If I should make a failure of this business—if Rattling Dick's gang should not be broken up—our arrangement will become known, and it will hardly be safe for you to remain in this country. Go to Bannock, then, and give this inclosure to the clerk of the territorial court. It contains some letters for my family, and one for you, which will secure to you the payment of all your expenses and damages."

"I don't want any thing of the kind, Mr. Maddox."

"You must take it, nevertheless. By the way, I am inclined to believe that you are not the same preacher who was obliged to leave Beaver."

"I am not," replied Henshaw, flushing a little. "If they had tried to treat me in that style, I am afraid that they would have stirred up the church militant."

"It is not likely, then, that you are known to Rattling Dick or any of his crew."

"It is but a little while since I came into this country."

"I believe that I will be as safe as you would be in my place. You will remain concealed for three or four days, and by that time I will finish my work, or it will finish me. But I must be getting on. Good-by, Mr. Henshaw."

"Farewell, sir, and may God help you!"

It was a little before noon when James Maddox reached the mouth of Wild Rose Pass, a locality which he had good reason to remember. He had been there but a few minutes, when two masked men rode up to him, and the foremost addressed him:

"I suppose you are the Parson who was to come from Lost Diggings?"

Maddox bowed.

"It is well for you that you came, and that you came alone. You have been watched, and I am sure that you have set no trap of any sort. You are a preacher all right, I reckon."

"I am a poor servant of the Lord, who tries to do his duty in his capacity. The summons that you sent me was a strange one, and it was hardly polite; but there must have been some pressing exigency, I suppose, that justified it."

"Something of the kind, I believe, and you will be well paid for your trouble, if you do it to my satisfaction. We will ride on, if you please."

The man who had spoken led the way, Maddox followed him, and the other outlaw brought up the rear. When they had left the rolling ground, and were fairly in the hills, they halted.

"Now, Dominie, if you have no objection, I must take the liberty of blindfolding you," said the leader.

"My name is Henshaw," replied Maddox, "and I will thank you to use it when you speak to me. You say that I must be blindfolded, and I surely have an objection to that. They are only the evil-doers who prefer darkness to light."

"That is all well enough; but this is a matter of necessity. You know that Rattling Dick is the man you are going to see, and he don't want all creation to know where he lives. Perhaps you might keep his secret; but, for fear of accidents, it is better that you shouldn't know it, and you will have to go into this business blindfolded."

"If it is a matter of compulsion, I can only submit; but I must enter a protest against this treatment."

"All right. It shall be put on record, as the lawyers say."

Maddox' eyes were securely blinded by a handkerchief that was tied over them, and he was cautioned against attempting to remove it. On condition that his hands should not be tied, he promised that he would not endeavor to use his eyes. He had, in fact, no objection to being blindfolded, as he knew the route and the place to which he was to be carried.

The bandage was not removed from his eyes until he had passed through the gap in the cliff and entered the valley. Then he recognized the place, from the description that had been given by Ben Durk, and was enchanted with its beauty. He could not help feeling that it was a pity that such a spot should be desecrated by becoming the abode of robbers; but such feelings had nothing to do with his business, and he did not indulge them to any extent. He sent his sharp eyes spying about, to see whether there was any way of ingress or egress except by the gap, but could discover nothing of the kind.

He was led into one of the tents, and the man who had

brought him in removed his mask, disclosing the swarthy features of Black Dick Hundsden.

"I am Rattling Dick, the man who sent for you," said that individual, "and I will now tell you why it was that I wanted you."

The outlaw then proceeded to give an account of his previous relations to Clara Staunton, and his present intention in regard to her. His statement was quite a fair and truthful one, except that he declared that the young lady had once promised to marry him, and had refused to make good her promise. He admitted that he had stopped the stage, and forcibly brought her and her brother to his den, because, as he believed, that action would be to their advantage. He admitted that Clara was unwilling to marry him, and had positively refused to do so; but argued that if she was unable to see her interest, she ought to be made to see it. He intended to marry her, and had brought the clergyman there for that purpose.

Maddox thought it best to put on a show of indignation.

"Can you suppose," he said, "that I, a clergyman, would consent to such a degradation of my holy office, that I would do an act which I know to be forbidden, by the laws of both God and man? Would my conscience allow me to marry that young lady to you, unless she should give her full and free consent to the marriage? I am surprised, sir, that you should have brought me here under the supposition that I could be guilty of such conduct."

"That is very good talk, Parson; but it is nothing but talk. You know that I am not a man to be trifled with. I have told you what my intention is, and you have nothing to do but to obey my orders. If you will do it, you shall be well paid. If you refuse, you shall starve until you die or give in, and there is nothing more to be said about it."

"You put the case very strongly. Would you consider such a marriage to be legal?"

"It would be legal enough for me. I only want to satisfy her brother, and get him off my hands. When she becomes my wife, he will go his own way. If it should be necessary to tie the knot any tighter, that can be attended to hereafter."

"Suppose we try to effect a compromise in this matter. If I could converse with the young lady, perhaps my powers of persuasion might have some influence upon her, and might induce her to consent to the marriage."

"Now you are talking sense. It will suit me much better to have her consent than to marry her without it, and I think it very likely that you can do something in that line. I believe you will try, as you have a pretty strong personal interest in the matter. Better have something to eat, in the first place."

This proposition was agreeable to Maddox, and food was brought in, and he ate with his entertainer. When the repast was finished, the outlaw pointed out the tent that was occupied by Turner and Clara Staunton.

"Shall I introduce you?" he asked.

"I believe I had rather introduce myself."

"Very well. They are in that tent, and you can just pile in, as fast and heavy as you please."

Turner Staunton and his sister had guessed that Henry Ashby was trying to assist them. The greater portion of the outlaws had lately returned from an expedition, in which they had evidently been worsted. One came back severely wounded, and another, as Turner heard, had been killed. He also overheard Richard Hunsden, who was in a terrible passion, speaking of Henry Ashby in a manner that caused him to infer that Ashby was one of the party with whom the outlaws had come in collision. Turner conjectured, furthermore, that a trap had been laid, by Ashby and others, which had nearly proved a success.

The captives were greatly surprised when they saw their late fellow-traveler in the stage enter the valley, and when they casually heard that he was the "Parson" whose arrival had been expected. As they could do nothing, they remained in their tent, and awaited the issue of events.

They were yet more surprised when Maddox entered the tent, and Turner spoke to him rather roughly.

"What do you want, sir? This is an intrusion."

"I hope not," replied Maddox, in a low tone. "I have news from Henry Ashby."

This was sufficient to bring bright glances from the eyes of both the captives, and joyful exclamations from their lips.

"Sit down," he continued, "and be quiet, and I will explain every thing to you. I must be careful, or I may be overheard."

With as few words as possible, he related all that had happened, since he had been separated from the brother and sister in the stage. When he spoke of the recovery of the canvas bag that Turner Staunton had given to Ben Durk, and of Henry Ashby's rapture at finding in it the photograph of Clara, that young lady blushed, and looked reproachfully at her brother, but said nothing. When he mentioned the two attempts that had been made upon the life of Ashby, she shuddered, and moved her lips as if in prayer. Turner could not refrain from expressing his wonder and admiration, when Maddox stated the purpose that had brought him alone to the outlaws' den.

"Is it possible," he said, "that you have come here with the expectation of taking that man single-handed? It is a desperate enterprise."

"Perhaps it is not so desperate as it may seem. Ashby and his friends will help us, if possible, and I think it is only a question of time with them. I must stave off the final result as long as possible, and for that purpose I must tell Rattling Dick that I have hopes of bringing this young lady to terms, and that she must have time to reflect and to listen to my persuasion. If it shall come to the worst, I suppose you would be willing to do something for yourself and your sister."

"You will find me more than ready, if you will tell me what I can do."

Maddox handed the young man a silver-mounted revolver.

"Leave everything to me," he said, "and assent to all I may say and do. Keep that pistol carefully concealed, and you will know when the time comes to strike. Don't show your hand until I lead, and then play it for all it is worth."

CHAPTER XV.

TRAILING THEM IN.

CALVIN PEASLEE sat in his cabin at Diamond Gulch. He was alone, and was engaged in no visible employment. Near him were bottles, jars, vials, packages, and other evidences that the room was devoted to the practice of the healing art; but he busied himself with none of these. Although his hands were idle, the workings of his countenance showed that his mind was active, and that its occupation was not altogether a pleasant one. He walked the floor impatiently, and his muttered words were imprecations upon the head of John Smith, his half-breed assistant, who appeared to be the cause of his present disquietude.

He had resumed his seat, when the door was quietly opened, and the identical John Smith crept in stealthily, closing it behind him. In his face was a mixture of fear, sullenness and chagrin. He carried a rifle, that looked as if it might have come in collision with a locomotive.

"What does this mean, you young villain?" wrathfully exclaimed Peaslee. "Where have you been all this time? I expected you back long ago. What have you been doing?"

"Tending to business," sullenly replied the half-breed.

"To the business that I sent you to do?"

"Nothin' else."

"Have you finished it? Is that fellow done for?"

"Not much he ain't."

"I know it. I saw it in your face as soon as you came in. You look as sneaking as a suck-egg dog. You have been making a botch of the business. If you have gone back on me a hair's breadth, I will find it out, and will give you a dose, you may depend upon it."

"I hain't gone back on nothin'. I did my best fur the thousand dollars, you bet; but it wasn't no use. I laid fur him, and draw'd a bead onto him, and his boss shied jest as I fired. That saved him that time, and I had to cut and

run. I got ahead of 'im ag'in and laid fur him jest at the aidge of a gully, and 'lowed that I had a sure thing on him that whirl. Jest when I was goin' to pull the trigger and send him to kingdom come, lightnin' struck me."

"Lightning struck you? What do you mean by that?"

"Just look at that gun of mine, and you'll think lightnin' had struck it. A shot was fired near me, and the bullet hit my rifle, and knocked it out of my hands, and skeered me nigh into fits. You'd better believe that I jist got up and dusted."

As Peaslee examined the rifle, his countenance expressed his surprise and dismay.

"Who fired that shot?" he asked. "Was it Ashby?"

"No—'twarn't him."

"Do you know who it was?"

"I think it was Old Traps; but I was mighty bad skeered."

"The devil! Do you suppose that either of them recognized you?"

"Don't know. I warn't thinkin' of nothin' but gittin' away from thar."

"That is bad—very bad. I would have given you two thousand, if you had done the work well. But he shan't escape *me*. I will set those after him who will make a sure thing of the job. I am going up into the mountains, and may be gone two or three days. You had better stay here and keep dark while I am away. If I should be needed for any thing that is really important, you know where to find me."

Peaslee mounted his mule, strapped on his saddle-bags, and rode away toward the west.

He had been gone about two hours, when Aleck Withers came to the cabin and inquired for the Doctor.

"He ain't here," replied the half-breed.

"Where is he?"

"Gone a-doctorin'."

"That's a pity. There is a man here—just come—who owes him a thousand dollars, and wants to pay it. As he is going to the east, the business must be settled to-day. Reckon you couldn't take the money for the Doctor—could you?"

"Take a thousand dollars? Well, yes, I'd be glad of the chance."

"Could you give a receipt for it, that would bind the Doctor?"

"Not much."

"It wouldn't do for the stranger to pay it to you, and I should hate to see a friend and neighbor lose his money. Don't you think you could find the Doctor?"

"Reckon I could."

"It is none of my business, of course; but I believe you had better hunt him up and bring him here."

"Reckon I better had."

The half-breed mounted a horse, and rode off in the direction that had been taken by his employer.

In his steps followed Peter, the young Shoshonie, riding a small Indian pony, keeping on the trail of the half-breed, and occasionally coming in sight of him, but never permitting himself to be seen, nor giving John Smith a chance to suspect that he was being dogged.

Not far behind Peter rode Aleck Withers, accompanied by Shasta Dick and five other men, all well armed.

When they had ridden some ten miles from the Gulch, they were joined by Ben Durk and Henry Ashby, who were also mounted and armed.

It was an expedition, without doubt, that meant business.

John Smith reached the mountains in the course of a few hours, and rode up into them till the way became too difficult for his horse. Then he turned aside from the trail he had been following, into a little valley where there were grass and water. Then he tethered his horse with a lariat, so that he might have range for food and drink, returned to the trail, and followed it on foot.

These movements were duly observed by Peter, who had halted and concealed himself, so that he might watch the proceedings of John Smith.

When the half-breed had gone on afoot, the Shoshonie followed his example, tethered his pony in the valley, returned to the trail, and was soon in sight of his quarry again.

Then came Aleck Withers and his party, who were but a

short distance behind their escort. They, also, left their horses in the valley, and returned to the trail on foot.

"You have marked the thing off about right, Judge," said Old Traps. "It's a queer kind of doctorin' that Peaslee does."

"We will find him out pretty soon," replied Aleck, "if nothing goes wrong. No honest man lives up in this part of the world, and the trail will lead us either into Rattling Dick's den or nowhere."

It did not seem likely that any thing could go wrong; but there was an interruption, before long, to the steady flow of good luck.

The mountain path was quite rugged and difficult in places, and the Shoshonie, in climbing along the edge of a ravine, displaced a large piece of rock, which made considerable noise as it plunged to the bottom.

John Smith heard the noise, and suddenly looked back, catching sight of Peter's head as he was dodging down to conceal himself. The half-breed at once concluded that he was being followed, and sought cover, in order that he might watch the movements of his supposed pursuer. Then ensued a game of reconnoitering between those two, which was kept up until Aleck Withers and his party came in view.

Motioning to them to stop, the Shoshonie crept back to where they had halted and explained the situation of affairs.

"There's but one thing to do now," said the Judge. "We must gobble him up and compel him to show us the rest of the way. Keep him in sight, Peter, and two or three of us will go around and head him off."

The Shoshonie crept back to his place, and Shasta Dick and two others made a circuit, with no little difficulty, until they reached a point on the mountain side, a little above and beyond the half-breed.

The game of reconnoitering continued until this object was gained, and then John Smith, who had been bewildered by the discovery of the fact of pursuit, was still more astonished when Aleck Withers and several other men rose up in front of him, and summoned him to surrender.

He turned to fly, but was confronted by Shasta Dick and his comrades, who told him that it was of no use, and that

he had better give in. As he could do nothing else he yielded.

When he was in the power of his pursuers, he protested against the arrest, and demanded to be told what they wanted of him, and what he had done that he should be followed and picked up in that style.

"It isn't for what you have done that we want you, but for what you are going to do," replied the Judge. "We know that you are on the way to Rattling Dick's camp, and we want to go there, too."

The half-breed declared that he knew nothing about Rattling Dick or his camp.

"You will gain nothing by lying about it," resumed the Judge. "We know what we know, and you must show us the way in there, or take the consequences. You have done enough to deserve hanging twice over, and we will swing you up inside of ten minutes, unless you do what I have told you to do."

"They will kill me," whined the half-breed.

"That is not likely, and it is certain that we will kill you if you refuse. They needn't know that you have spoken to us. Go on, and tell them that you have been followed and driven in, or what you please."

John Smith could do nothing but obey. He led the party to a mountain brook, and down its course to a gap, where it made a long plunge into a valley. Tents were visible in the valley, and Ben Durk recognized it. The half-breed pointed to a tall tree, the top of which reached above the waterfall, and he went on and jumped into the tree. The others prepared to follow.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CRISIS OF FATE.

WHEN Maddox had made an end of his conference with the captives, he returned to Rattling Dick, who was awaiting him in his own tent

"What's the news?" eagerly inquired the outlaw.

"I believe that I have made some impression upon the young lady," replied Maddox. "She seems to have a personal objection to you; but I have known ladies to marry men whom they disliked, when they could better their condition by doing so. The career that you have followed in this country seems to be an obstacle with her."

"That will all be blotted out, when we are far from here, and have plenty of money."

"So I have told her. As I said, I think that my arguments have made an impression upon her; but she wants time to consider, and I hope you will give her as much as you reasonably can."

"She can have until to-morrow evening to make up her mind. I am expecting a friend, who will not be here until to-morrow, and I want him to be present at the ceremony."

"If you have no objection, I will continue to reason with her, when I can do so without seeming to intrude upon her, and I have strong hopes of bringing her to the point of consenting to your wishes."

"That's right, Parson. Crack your whip, and do all you can for me. I want her consent if I can get it, and it stands you in hand to persuade her to it, as you know that you must marry us, or do the other thing."

Maddox had no difficulty in procuring admission to the tent of the captives. His presence there was not considered an intrusion, and his arguments were such as found favor in their eyes. At night he was furnished lodging in the tent of Rattling Dick, to whom he reported that his progress thus far had been most satisfactory, that the young lady had shown a willingness to listen to reason, and that her brother had nearly withdrawn his opposition to the marriage.

Before noon the next day he made another report, to the effect that Clara had finally yielded her consent, on the condition that Mr. Hunsden should immediately take her brother and herself to the East, where the marriage could be celebrated in such a manner that there would be no doubt of its legality.

Maddox rubbed his hands and smiled gleefully when he

made this report, as if glad that he had extricated himself from a painful position.

"I don't object to the condition," replied the outlaw. "That is just what I intended to do. I am glad that it has turned out so well, and it is a good thing for you, Parson. As soon as I am married to her, I shall make you a present of five hundred dollars."

The officer also employed his time in looking about the valley, searching for the entrance which he suspected existed somewhere; but in this he was disappointed. He noticed the outlet of the brook, and wondered that Ben Durk had ever thought of getting out at that place. At the other end the brook came in through a narrow gap, and fell at least fifty feet to its bed in the valley.

The mystery of the secret entrance was not solved until an hour or so after noon, when Maddox, who happened to be looking at the waterfall, saw a man step out of the gap and descend a tall tree that stood near it. He was satisfied, and watched the man until he reached the ground and came forward, proving to be the individual who was known at Diamond Gulch as Calvin Peaslee.

"That is the very man I have been waiting for," said Rattling Dick. "You can go into the tent now, Parson, and tell those folks to get ready for the marriage."

Maddox went into the tent of the Stauntons, where he informed them that the crisis had come, and gave Turner Staunton a few brief instructions. He remained there until Rattling Dick lifted the tent-flap, and said that he was ready for the ceremony.

The captives walked out, preceded by Maddox, who stationed them at the foot of a cliff that rose, sharp and steep, near the tents. Calvin Peaslee came forward to view them, and the countenances of both were filled with surprise and disgust.

"Levi Hunsden!" exclaimed Turner.

"The same, young gentleman," rejoined Peaslee, with a poor attempt at a smile. "I am glad to learn that your sister has concluded to become a member of my family, and I hope that we will get along pleasantly together, and that the arrangement will be profitable and agreeable to all."

"I suppose that I ought to have told you, Clara, that **my** respected parent would be present to witness our marriage," said Richard Hunsden; "but I wasn't sure that he would come, and I wanted to give you a pleasant surprise."

Clara's look of contempt showed that she appreciated the "pleasant surprise."

"Who is this stranger, Richard?" asked Peaslee, as he may still be called, pointing at Maddox.

"Him? Why, that's the Parson from Lost Diggings. His name is Henshaw. I thought you knew him."

"I know Henshaw by sight, and I am certain that this is not the man."

Rattling Dick was even more astonished than indignant. He stepped forward, and his small eyes fairly shot fire as he addressed Maddox.

"How is this, sir? Are you playing a game here? Speak quick, and tell me the truth."

The answer of Maddox was a pistol, that appeared as if by magic in his right hand, cocked and leveled at his questioner. The shrill and piercing tones of his voice rung out like the upper notes of a bugle.

"This is the game I am playing. There's my hand—all trumps, and my partner assists. Chip in, as fast as you please; but I warn you that the first man who attempts to draw a weapon will die, sure, and of such is the kingdom of hell!"

Simultaneously with the action of his friend, Turner Staunton drew a pistol, and stood ready to act, either on the defensive or on the aggressive. Clara, in obedience to a sign from her brother, sheltered herself in a little niche in the cliff.

The position of the two men was a strong one. With their backs against the rock, they could neither be flanked nor attacked in the rear. They had six shots apiece, with the advantage of the move. It was no wonder that the outlaws shrunk back from the two deadly tubes that stared them in the face.

It was necessary that there should be a change of scene very soon, and the interruption came from a man who stepped out of the gap at the head of the waterfall, and hastily climbed down the tall tree."

"It is John Smith!" exclaimed Peaslee. "What can be the matter now?"

John Smith answered the question himself, as he came running toward the group.

"Thar's a lot of fellers been follerin' me," he said, as soon as he could get breath enough to speak. "They cotched up with me just a little bit ago, and driv' me in here, and thar's a man at the Gulch, Doctor, who wants to pay you a thousand dollars."

"Curse you and your thousand dollars!" exclaimed Rattling Dick. "Couldn't you have led them in some other direction?"

"I couldn't do nothin' but run, and they war right behind me."

And so they were. As the half-breed spoke, one after another came out of the gap, dropped into the tree, and hurriedly made their way toward the ground.

The situation was peculiar. As soon as the half-breed said that he had been followed, Maddox knew that Ashby and his friends had been on the trail, with intent to discover the secret entrance to the valley. When John Smith went on to state that they were right behind him, the officer could not doubt that they had succeeded in their object, and he gave Turner Staunton a glance that was full of joy and confidence.

Rattling Dick and the others, in the excitement caused by the arrival of John Smith and by his tale of pursuit, had for the moment forgotten the two men who stood with their backs to the rock. Now they were confronted by enemies on two sides, and a movement in either direction was dangerous. But it was necessary that something should be done quickly, and the outlaws were desperate enough for any thing.

Rattling Dick drew a pistol from his belt; but, before he could raise it, Maddox opened the ball. A shot from his revolver crashed through the right wrist of the outlaw, whose pistol dropped harmlessly upon the ground. Maddox and Staunton then opened with their pistols, firing first upon those who first drew their weapons.

Henry Ashby, who was the first to reach the foot of the tree, was within rifle-range of the outlaws as soon as he touched the ground, and he lost no time in drawing a bead

on one of them. His companions followed suit, emptying their rifles, and then running toward the tents. The outlaws also fired their rifles and pistols as rapidly as they could get them at work, and the bullets sung lively tunes in all directions.

Maddox emptied the six chambers of his revolver in hardly more than as many seconds, and then rushed upon Rattling Dick, and collared him as he was stooping to pick up his pistol with his left hand.

"You are my prisoner," said the officer. "I arrest you on a charge of robbing the mail."

Rattling Dick looked up in astonishment and indignation, but his wrist was broken, and he was in the grasp of a man whose sinews were of steel.

Calvin Peaslee drew a pistol with the others, but discharged it into the breast of the half-breed, probably thinking that he would make away with that much evidence. Then he turned and ran toward the gap. The remaining outlaws, outnumbered and hard pressed, broke and ran in the same direction; but there were two ends of the gap, and the outer end was blocked by a party that had been sent up that trail by Aleck Withers.

The battle was over in a few minutes. Of the assailants one man was killed, and one claim on Old Traps' discovery was "counted out." Two were wounded, including Turner Staunton. Of the outlaws, two had been killed outright, and two, besides their leader, were badly wounded. The rest were prisoners.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

"OH, Clara!"

That was Henry Ashby's exclamation when he ran up to where Clara Staunton was kneeling by the side of her brother. It may not have been very romantic; but it was full of feeling, and it told her, among other things, that he had not for-

gotten his love for her. He added nothing to it, as he perceived that she was engaged in staunching the blood that flowed from her brother's wound.

Clara gave him a grateful glance, and resumed her occupation.

"Is he badly hurt?" asked Ashby.

"I don't know; but I fear that he is."

Ashby and Ben Durk took the case in hand, and discovered that Turner's wound, although severe, was not at all dangerous, the ball having struck one of his left ribs and glanced off. Old Traps stopped the bleeding, and dressed the wound in mountain fashion, and the young man was taken into a tent and made as comfortable as possible.

James Maddox, who had secured Rattling Dick so that there was no chance for him to escape, thought it his duty to bind up the shattered wrist of his prisoner, assuring him that he would be put at hard labor for the benefit of his country, if no worse fate should befall him, and that he would need two hands for the performance of his duties.

The outlaw submitted sullenly to the manipulations of the officer, and only showed his temper by venting curses on his father, whom he accused of being the author of all his misfortunes. The old man had no reply to make to this, but kept his own counsel, evidently hoping that there would not be evidence enough to convict him of any crime, until Aleck Withers told him of the discovery of the scraps of letter and the fifty dollar bill. Then he hung his head, and appeared to be completely bewildered and broken down.

When the dead had been buried, and the wounded cared for, the miners became anxious to get a sight of the "pocket" which Old Traps had promised to show them.

The old trapper was ready to perform his part of the contract. A sufficient guard was placed over the prisoners, and he led the rest of the miners to the lower end of the valley, where he pointed out the entrance to the "pocket."

It was not easy for them to believe that any man could get out of the valley by such a means of exit; but he soon put an end to their incredulity by plunging into the stream, and by calling upon them to follow, when he reached the inner recess of which he had spoken. They obeyed his instructions,

and succeeded in passing the barrier that divided the two valleys, with no damage beyond the wetting of their clothes.

They perceived that the smaller valley was exactly such as Old Traps had described it to be, and he pointed out the spot where he had found his scales and nuggets. The miners at once set to work to "grabble" in the earth, and more than verified his report of his discoveries. They were enchanted, enraptured, overjoyed, and lost no time in staking off claims two of which were reserved for the discoverer.

Henry Ashby took no part in these proceedings, but remained in the upper valley, with Clara Staunton and her brother. He had much to hear, concerning the vicissitudes of fortune through which they had passed, and had much to tell them, concerning his life and efforts since he left Virginia.

While they were thus pleasantly employed, Ben Durk entered the tent, and told them of the result of his expedition with the miners, in search of the "pocket."

"I believe that I will keep the claim that Shasta Dick laid off for me at Diamond Gulch," he said, "as he would feel bad if I shouldn't take it; but these two claims that I have got here I mean to set over to you young gen'lemen."

"You are very kind," said Ashby; but you ought not to throw away your property so recklessly. How is it that you happen to take such an interest in us?"

"The fact is, Harry, that I am sorter related to these two fr'ends of your'n here. It's likely that they never heerd of thar uncle Ben; but I am Ben Staunton, thar father's brother. I was the black sheep of that family, and got disgusted and quit home when I was quite a young man. Since then I have been in these parts most of the time, trappin' and huntin' and Injun-fightin' and sich, and my ways have got to be wild ways. I disremember how I got the name of Durk—'twas so long ago; but it has stuck to me, and I didn't keer to change it. I suppose I would never have thought of my brother Jim's folks, if I hadn't happened to run across these two; but it makes me feel better to know that there's somebody of my kin in the world. As for you, Harry, you know that I like you. I don't reckon that you have any need of the claim; but I thought that you might be willin' to work it out for *her*."

Judging by the look that Henry Ashby bestowed upon "her," he would have been willing to do a great deal more than that for her.

The miners who composed "the company" decided that they would form a camp in the valley immediately, and some of their number were dispatched, the next morning, to bring provisions, tools and other necessities. Within a very short time shanties were erected, the entrance to the "pocket" was enlarged by blasting, and active work upon the gold deposits were begun. They proved to be unusually rich, and Aleck Withers and his friends, as they held the key to the valley, were enabled to keep out all who were unwilling to pay for a share in the "find."

All the outlaws, including old Levi Hunsden, were taken, under a strong guard, to the nearest jail in the territory, where they were securely confined and held for trial.

It was hoped that Rattling Dick might be tried for murder; but it was impossible to obtain sufficient evidence to warrant a conviction for that crime. He was tried, therefore, on the charge of robbing the mails, and found guilty, and was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment. His followers were convicted and sentenced on various charges.

Against Levi Hunsden it was proved that he had shot John Smith, the half-breed, and he was indicted for murder, but died in prison before he could be tried. His property at Diamond Gulch, according to the suggestion of Aleck Withers, was "divided among the sufferers," as far as they could be ascertained.

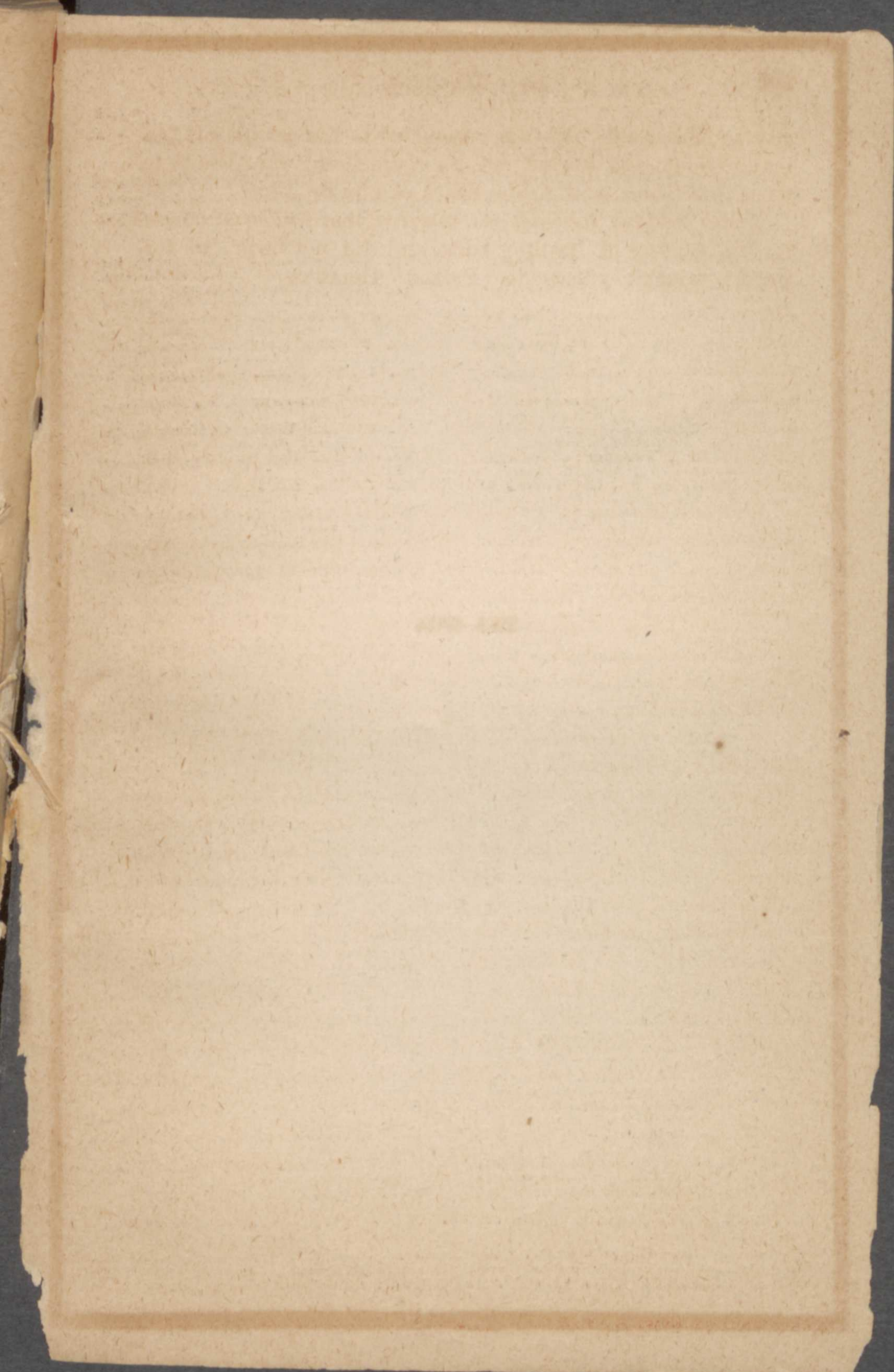
When Turner Staunton had recovered from his wound, he assisted Ashby in working out the two claims in the "pocket," and they had good reason to be satisfied with the results of their labor. When they had finished this task, they took Clara to Richmond, where Ashby entered upon the possession of his property and his promised bride. Clara never taught any children but her own, and Turner practiced law in his native city, instead of the wilds of Oregon.

The young people endeavored to persuade Old Traps to visit the East and remain with them, that he might have rest and ease in his old age; but he positively refused to do so, declaring that he would be unable to live a month in such a

city as Richmond. He was reconciled to the people of Diamond Gulch, and worked out his claim there, after which he went to Arizona, and Ashby heard of him no more.

James Maddox received the rewards that had been offered for the capture of Rattling Dick, and did not forget to forward a valuable present to "Parson" Henshaw.

THE END.



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